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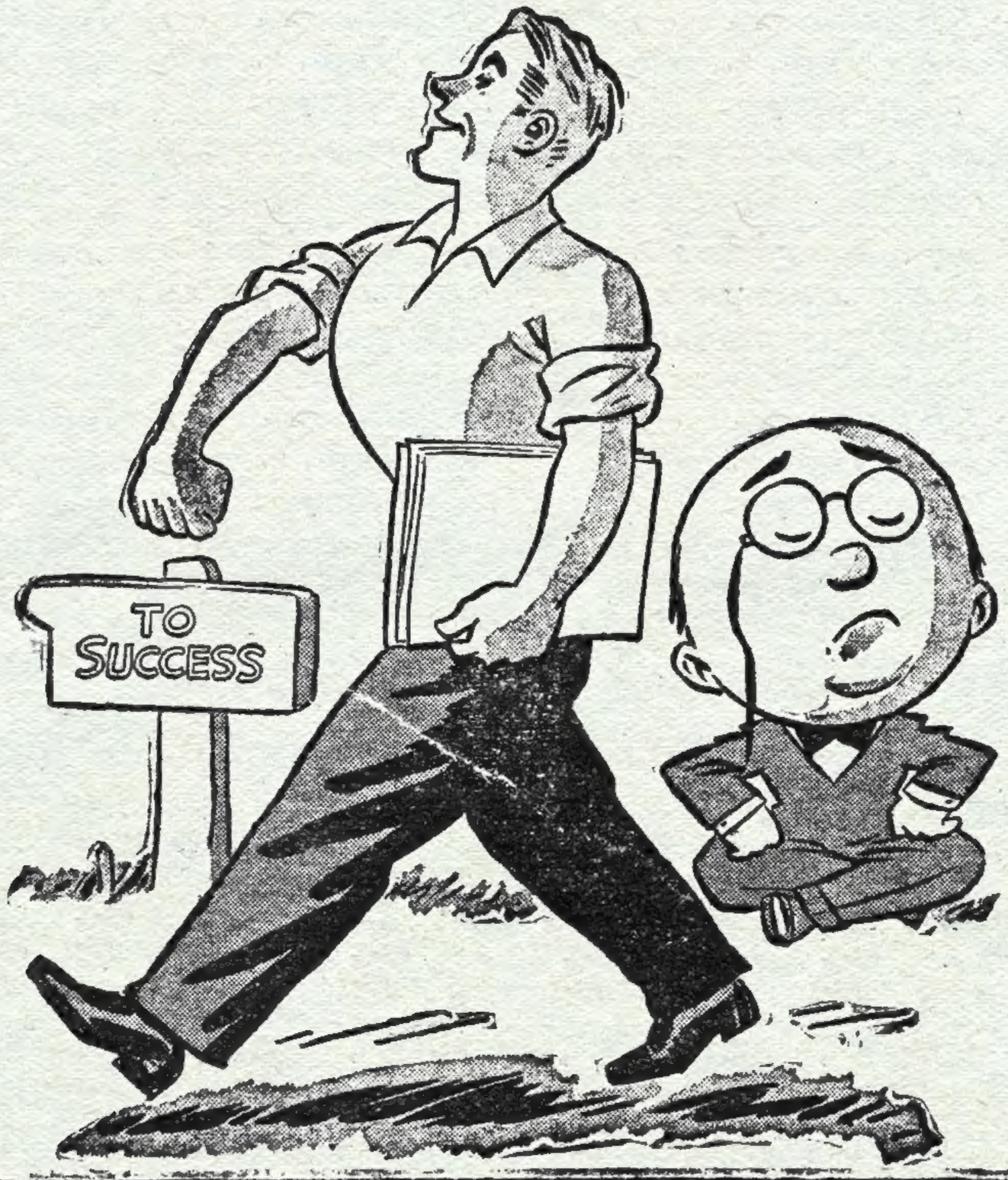

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by Gunnison Steele

Fearing the guns of no man, Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui pard face desperate danger as they come up against a vicious death-dealing boss of outlaws in Pipe-Organ Canyon! The Masked Rider braves the threat of evil, coiling doom! *11*

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A "death warrant" is what Cal Bozeman calls his agreement with Curt Dolph

SKIM FACES THE MUSIC *by Raymond S. Spears* *87*
Sheriff Lon Carday and young Skim Rasson join forces to fight for justice

DEPUTIES THREE *by L. P. Holmes* *97*
Ike, Puggy and Shoo-Fly take over the law in the tough town of Settlement

SPECIAL FEATURES

TRAIL TALK *by Foghorn Clancy* *6*

LAST ROUNDUP FOR THE WILD HORSES *by Jackson Cole* *95*

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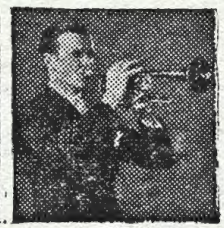

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HI WADDIES, once more we gather for another trail jaunt and Trail Talk, a trail jaunt that will take us back about seventy years to the time when the trails held romance and danger, when there was adventure on every trail and when the trails were the only lines over which one could travel from one part of the country to the other. Most of our trails of today are simply bridle paths over which people ride on horseback for pleasure, but in the days which we are going back to on this trail jaunt, the trails generally held anything but pleasure!

One could never have driven an automobile or truck over those old trails of yesteryear. In fact there were many places along those old-time trails where it took much ingenuity upon the part of many men to get the lumbering, but stout, old covered wagons over dangerously rough spots or across streams.

Many times in this modern day we motor along, cross a beautiful stream on a costly bridge, and admire the beauty of the scenery. We have the comfort of a smooth ride, and we never think of the cost of the bridge which we are crossing, or how many men, and perhaps women and children, lost their lives in crossing this same stream, perhaps at the same spot, in those early trail days.

Rampaging Streams

Those streams in the early trail days had a habit of rising quite rapidly, almost suddenly, and some of them still retain that habit, for they drain a large area of hills or mountainous country and a sudden hard rain is all that is necessary to send them on a rampage.

Of course, when there is a good strong concrete or steel bridge spanning these streams, as there are across most of them today, there is not much danger or discomfort in crossing, but in those old trail days a wagon train or men with a trail herd would often come upon a stream that had to be crossed and find the stream rising. They knew that if they did not cross at once they might have to wait for days for the high water to subside, and in a case of this kind they would nearly always take more chances than they would have ordinarily taken.

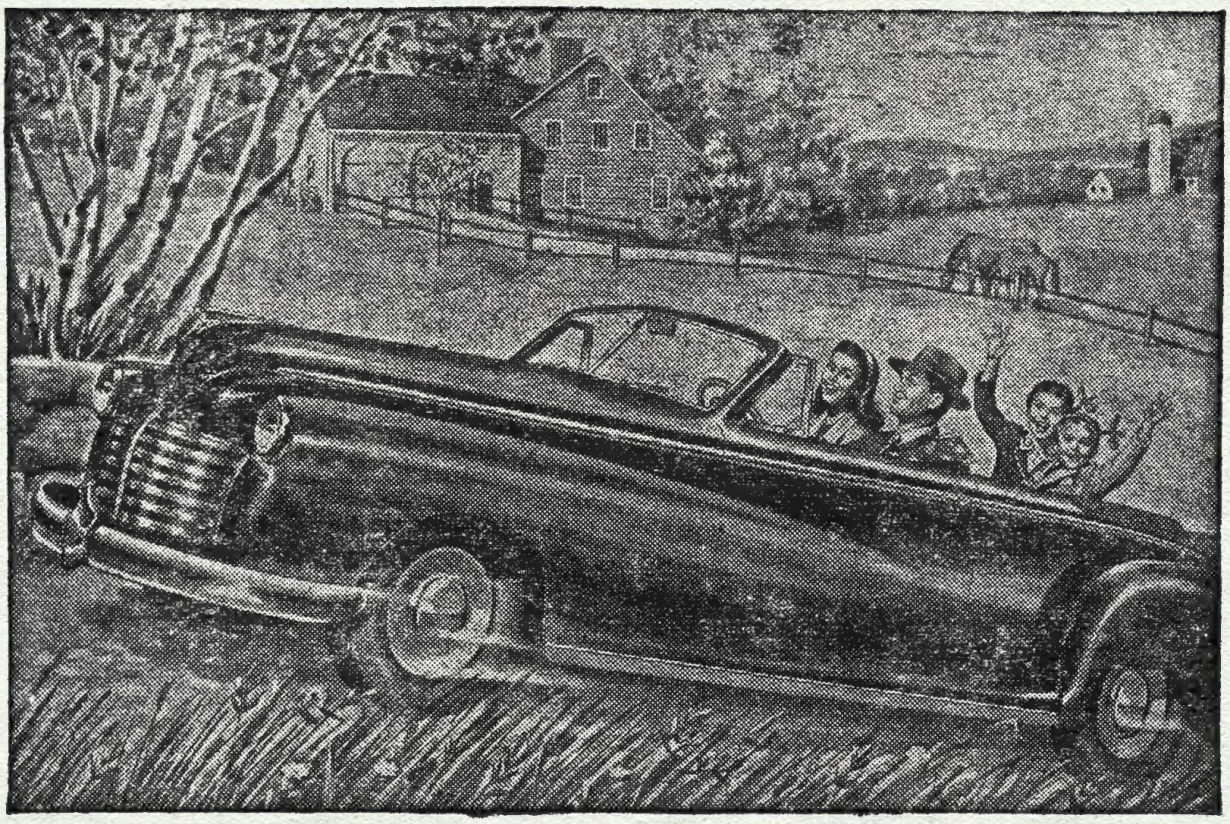
It is expected that the few remaining members of the Old Trail Drivers of Texas, an organization of men who drove cattle over the trails to market in the early days of the cattle industry, will meet again in annual convention in San Antonio. There won't be many of them, because there are few left. Most of those grand old fellows have already gone on that last long trail ride to the great beyond.

The Old Trail Drivers of Texas was organized in San Antonio in February, 1915, and George W. Saunders, who became vice-president of the organization, was the moving spirit working for the formation of the organization. J. R. Blocker was elected president.

Real Old Timers

The following, taken from the Secretary's record, gives an outline of the first steps that were taken toward organizing the association. Its purpose was to include in its membership those survivors who had shared the dangers, vicissitudes and hardships of the trail. After a general discussion it was unani-

(Continued on page 8)



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TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 6)

mously resolved to perfect the organization and prepare for the enrollment.

At the time it was suggested that the association affiliate with the Texas Cattle Raiser's Association and hold joint meetings with that organization. At the Cattle Raiser's convention in March, 1915, a great many members were added to the new association, and in March, 1916, the trail drivers had their first roundup when the Cattle Raiser's convention met in Houston.

One can readily understand why there will be few members meeting in any annual convention of the old trail drivers when one takes into consideration that those drives with herds of cattle up the long, dusty trails started in the late 60's and early 70's and were practically discontinued in the early 90s or about six decades ago. A fellow old enough to take part even in the late cattle drives would be quite old now, almost too old to attend conventions, while those who took part in the early trail drives have nearly all passed on.

A Grand Bunch

The old trail drivers had quite a time at those conventions talking of the old drives and the dangers and hardships along the trail. They were great hands to joke with one another, to tell of the funny things that happened or of a joke played upon some member of a crew of drivers along the trail. They would tell of the heroic deeds of others, but would seldom allude to any part they played in any heroic deed. They were a great class of men and it is to be regretted that their ranks are thinning so rapidly that in a few more short years they will be only a lingering memory of the past.

We might ask ourselves the question: "Why were there trail drivers?" The answer is that they were a class of men who came to the rescue of the cattle industry when it looked like it would never survive. They were pioneers, they were men of daring and heroism, men of sterling worth and integrity.

This was proven in every instance wherein they came in contact with the problems and difficulties that made for the development of an empire so vast in its possibilities as to excite the envy of the world. The pages of their history sparkle with the lustre of deeds well done, and may we always keep in our

memory and in our writings the bright lustre of the history of those grand pioneers so that it may not pale with fleeting years!

To the memory of the old trail drivers, the pioneers, to the heroic mothers, fathers—to the young and the brave who fought manfully for the proud, imperial West and Southwest that we enjoy today, mere monuments of stone or marble are hardly enough, unless we keep in our memory and our writings the glow of the sincerity of purpose of these great characters.

Hides and Tallow

Before the advent of railroads the marketing of cattle was a problem that confronted the men who attempted the raising of cattle, especially in Texas, which might be called the original home of cattle in quantities. There was practically an unlimited space for the cattle to roam over, and they did roam, and there was little if any market for cattle. In fact about the only marketable products of cattle were the hides and tallow, and as strange as it may seem to people of this day of scarcity and high prices of beef, there were thousands upon thousands of cattle slaughtered just for the hides and tallow that they produced.

Then came the Civil War, and the cattlemen and the cowboys of Texas and the Southwest marched off to the battlefields, and the cattle were left to roam over the country without any care from anyone. With the war over and the men who had lived through it back home, they found that the cattle had grown as wild as wild beasts. Unbranded calves had grown to maturity still without brands or identification marks. The state of Texas as well as the rest of the South was in a deplorable financial condition. The state was overstocked with cattle, but they were wild and of little or no value.

It was then that a few of the most venturesome stockmen, in 1867 and 1869, took a few small herds of cattle to New Orleans, Baxter

(Continued on page 105)

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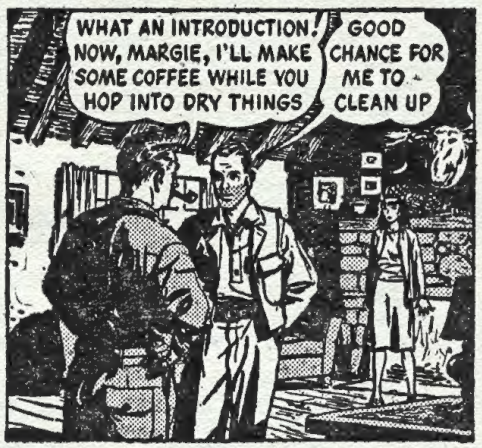

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TRAIL OF THE BLUE SNAKE

Tait jammed his Winchester over a boulder (CHAPTER I)

A Masked Rider Novel

By

GUNNISON STEELE

Fearing the guns of no man, Wayne Morgan and his Yaqui pard face desperate danger when they come up against a vicious death-dealing outlaw boss in Pipe-Organ Canyon!

CHAPTER I

Rider in Black

THEY had fled down from the timbered foothills, the young cowboy and the girl, in a desperate race for the floor of white Bear Basin and safety. Now they had reached the basin, but not safety. Instead, disaster threatened to overwhelm them.

For the youth's horse had suddenly gone lame. The mount ran on at a crow-hoppy gallop, straining a weary body. The girl slowed her dun, refusing to forge on.

Hugh Tait was twenty, slender and dark-eyed. His sister, Starr, was a year younger. She was a lithe, golden-haired girl, her vital beauty enhanced rather than hidden by the man's garb she wore. Now her blue eyes showed desperation, but no fear, as she flung a glance back over her shoulder.

"Go on, Starr!" Hugh cried urgently. "Don't hang back for me! Mebbe yuh can make it to the Star Cross. I'll hole up somewheres and hold the skunks off till yuh can bring help!"

The girl shook her head firmly. "I won't leave you! We'll both make it, or neither of us. They're gaining, Hugh, fast!"

He twisted in his saddle to glance backward. Less than a quarter of a mile away, he saw half a dozen riders emerge from a belt of timber and race toward them. It was obvious to him that, with his horse lame, the oncoming riders would quickly overtake them. As Hugh Tait watched, a thin plume of smoke lanced out from one of the riders.

A second later, they heard the high, thin whine of a bullet.

"They've got rifles, and they aim to cut us down!" Hugh said savagely. "They'll do it, too, in no time. Starr, yuh've got to go on and try to get away!"

The girl only shook her head. Suddenly she lifted her finger, and pointed.

"Those cliffs over there, Hugh. Wouldn't that be a good place to make a stand?"

"About our only chance—if it is a chance!"

They had dipped into a low place between two ridges. And now they swerved their horses and headed toward a nest of low red cliffs two hundred yards away on the floor of the little sink. The base of the cliffs was lined with boulders. In a last desperate effort they gained the cliffs, urged their horses into a shallow niche, and leaped to the ground. Hugh Tait snatched his rifle from a saddle-boot.

"Into them boulders over there!" he snapped. "They may get us, but they'll know they've been in a fight first!"

THE brother and sister darted among a nest of waist-high boulders, which formed a sort of natural fortress, and flung themselves to the ground. Before them, and on two sides, was more or less open ground. At their backs were the sheer walls of the cliffs lifting stark black fingers against the ominous sky.

Just as they gained the shelter the half-dozen riders, led by a gigantic man with dark, brutal features, plunged over the crest of the low ridge. They spurred down into the sink. And then, obviously puzzled, they slowed their mounts, their eyes probing in all directions for their prey.

"There are their broncs, over there among them cliffs!" one of them suddenly shouted. "We've got 'em treed!"

Hugh Tait, knowing they were discovered, rammed his rifle barrel over a boulder and blazed a shot at the riders. One of the horsemen yelled, slapped at his thigh as if a wasp had stung him. Then all of them scattered like a covey of quail, seeking various places of concealment. In seconds not a man was in sight.

But from behind boulders and out-jutting ledges they opened up. Gunfire rolled and thundered among the walls. Hot lead hailed against the boulders behind which Hugh and his sister huddled, showering them with rock fragments, ricocheting wickedly off into space.

Hugh and Starr crouched low against the earth, waiting for the furious gunstorm to spend itself. In the girl's tanned hand was a slender-barreled .38 six-shooter, smoke curling from its muzzle.

"They can't get at our backs," she said calmly.

"They won't have to," Hugh said bitterly. "They can creep almost right up to us, through the boulders, without exposin' theirselves. Then they can rush us —and we won't have a chance!"

"Maybe somebody will hear the shots," Starr said hopefully.

"Who'd hear 'em? The Star Cross is the nearest ranch, and it's seven miles away. Anyway, I'm not so shore Uncle Adam would send help if he could."

"Hugh!" Starr protested. "You shouldn't say such things. I'll admit he has changed, but I suppose there's some reason for it."

"Mebbe so, but I can't savvy that reason, any more than I can savvy why them gents out there want to kill us. But they do, and we've got to face it."

"That's plain," Starr agreed tightly. "They didn't say anything, up there, just opened up on us. They want us dead! But why, Hugh?"

The gunfire slackened, then died out.

"You young 'uns, there!" a bull-like voice shouted. "Yuh can't get away. Lay

down yore guns and come out, and we'll treat yuh right."

"We've already had a sample of what you call right," Hugh Tait yelled back hotly. "What's the idea? Why're yuh tryin' to kill us?"

"Who said we wanted to kill yuh? We just want to make some talk with yuh. Yuh aim to lay down yore guns, like I said?"

"No, Hugh!" Starr warned quickly. "He's lying. I'm certain they'll kill us if we do what he says!"

"They'll do it, anyhow," Hugh muttered. But he raised his voice, and called, "If you cussed snakes want us, yuh'll have to come and get us!"

"All right, yuh young fools, we'll do just that!"

The furious gunfire opened up again, bellowing and echoing among the cliffs. Hugh and Starr returned the fire, through crevices between the boulders, but they dared not expose themselves because bullets from the attackers drummed like hail all about them. The killers knew that the advantage lay with them. Under the protection of this savage barrage, they were creeping slowly and stealthily forward.

Now the nearest of them was forty yards away. Within moments the distance would become feet. They had spread out, were converging on the boulders, like the jaws of a steeltrap.

Hugh and Starr Tait looked with bitter eyes and pale faces at each other. Theirs

WAYNE MORGAN

was the high courage of the West. But they were young, and life was sweet, and they didn't know why they were about to die.

"If it was only me, I could stand it," Hugh said harshly. "But you— Mebbe it'd be best to do what they want."

"No! This way is best, if we must go!"

With steady hands Starr reloaded her gun.

THE gunfire still thundered, lead still hammered on the boulders about them. The pack was relentlessly

closing in. Hugh Tait jammed his Winchester recklessly over a boulder and pulled the trigger.

"Look, Hugh—on the ridge!" Starr Tait cried, her voice vibrant with sudden hope.

Hugh twisted his head to look where she indicated. And there on the crest of the ridge before them, silhouetted darkly against the blazing crimson of the late afternoon sky, were the figures of two riders.

One of them was like a master painting in black—a tall, stalwart rider, mounted on a magnificent coal-black stallion. He wore a black sombrero, a black domino mask covered his eyes, and draped over his powerful shoulders was a black cape.

The other rider was a Yaqui Indian, lithe, powerfully built. He was mounted on a wiry gray. The Indian wore drill pants and white shirt, with a scarlet sash tied about his lean waist. His raven-black hair, falling to his shoulders, was held in place by a crimson bandeau. His coppery hands gripped a Winchester and, sheathed in the sash, was a long-bladed knife.

The two riders paused there on the ridge crest a moment, gazing down into the sink, like dark stone images.

"It's the Masked Rider, Hugh!" Starr Tait cried. "I've heard he has a habit of showing up where he's badly needed—and now I can believe it!"

The gunfire had slackened among the killer gang. Obviously they, too, had seen the two riders and were puzzled.

Suddenly the masked man lifted a hand and pointed. As if by magic, a long-barreled, black six-shooter appeared in each of his hands. The huge black stallion reared, pawing the air, and then rocketed down the ridge, followed closely by the Indian on the gray.

Cries rose among the attackers.

"The Masked Rider! Let's get out of here!"

"Stand and fight, yuh yellow coyotes!" bellowed their dark-faced leader. "What if it is the Masked Rider? There's only two of 'em, and half a dozen of us. Cut 'em down!" The gunfire started up again.

The Masked Rider drove the mighty stallion, Midnight, recklessly down into the sink. The twin black Colts in his hands were blazing, roaring, the sounds mingling with the deeper-toned crashes from the rifle of Blue Hawk, the Yaqui. They had separated slightly, but they never faltered in their wild, headlong charge. The deadly recklessness of the attack had its effect on the killers. Their fire became wild, inaccurate.

And now Hugh Tait, yelling derisively, leaped upright and blazed away with his Winchester. His sister was firing, too.

A MAN among the boulders yelled, stumbled and fell, then went scuttling on hands and knees for shelter, like a giant crab. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk swerved slightly, riding in a quick half-circle, their guns still blasting.

Behind the domino mask the black-garbed rider's eyes were as cold as blue ice. He seemed a part of the stallion as he rode, guiding the great mount with a pressure of his knees, his black cape billowing out behind him.

Suddenly the killers' nerve broke.

"We're caught between two fires!" one of them bawled. "I ain't paid to be cut to pieces—I'm ridin'!"

Their ranks broke quickly, and they retreated, clawing and scuttling back through the boulders toward their horses. Hammering lead from the roaring guns of the two riders turned their retreat into a panic-stricken rout. Swiftly there was a clatter of hoofs against hard earth as the killer crew spurred up out of the sink and vanished over the low ridge.

The Masked Rider lifted his hand, and the black and the Yaqui's gray slid to a halt. It had been evident, even to Hugh and Starr Tait, that the fire of the two had been purposefully inaccurate, meant to force a retreat rather than to kill. This, too, tied in with tales they had heard of the legendary Masked Rider—that he never killed unless absolutely necessary.

"We do not follow, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked, in almost perfect English. "Senor" was the only name by which the Yaqui ever addressed his companion of the danger trails.

"Let 'em go," said the masked man. "They won't cause any more trouble today. Besides, we don't know what this is all about. There might be a chance we're on the wrong side."

"When half a dozen hombres chase a young cowboy and a girl, Senor," Blue Hawk said, "it is not hard to guess on which side are right and justice."

Though the Masked Rider retained his grim hold on the snake, the coils were slowly tightening, and there seemed no way out of his desperate predicament (CHAPTER XIV)

"Right, Hawk." The masked man nodded. "Well, we'll soon find out."

CHAPTER II

Coils of Death

HUGH TAIT and his sister had left the boulders and were coming toward the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. On the faces of the two was something akin to awe. They had never before seen the Masked Rider or his Yaqui trail-mate, but like thousands of others over the West, they had heard countless—and conflicting—tales of this black-garbed, mysterious Robin Hood rider whose indomintable courage and blazing guns had aided the downtrodden and oppressed from Canada to the Rio Grande.

Some said that he was an outlaw, a cold-blooded killer, a devilish renegade who killed and robbed without conscience. There was a fortune in bounty on his head.

Others—and they were in the majority—knew him for what he was—a champion of the oppressed. They knew wherever the wicked threatened the righteous, wherever honest men and women were threatened with death or slavery, this dashing, reckless figure and his Yaqui companion were apt to appear suddenly and unexpectedly, to throw the weight of their dauntless courage and deadly guns into the endless fight for right and justice.

But no man—not even the Yaqui, Blue Hawk, who held a deep, unshakable loyalty and affection for the Masked Rider—knew the true identity of the Robin Hood outlaw, nor why he had dedicated his life to the righting of wrong over the great West. What Blue Hawk alone did know was that the Masked Rider and a drifting cowboy who called himself Wayne Morgan were the same man. And only the Indian knew the full extent of the masked man's bitter, implacable hatred for evil and injustice.

Hugh Tait and his sister came up to them. The Masked Rider lifted his hat briefly to the girl, bowed, appreciating her young beauty. It was the girl who spoke, in a rich, low voice.

"Thanks, Masked Rider," she said, smiling. "We were in a pretty tight spot."

The masked man swung lithely to the ground.

"Yes, I reckon yuh was," he drawled. While a brilliant, well-educated man, he spoke always in the easy idiom of the West. "Hawk and me heard the shots from over yonder a piece, and saw them hombres chase yuh down out of the foothills. We got here as quick as we could. Mind tellin' me what it was about?"

The young waddy and his sister glanced quickly at each other.

"I wish we could," Hugh Tait said, shaking his head. "But the fact is, we ain't shore ourselves."

"Yuh don't even know who they were?" asked the masked man.

"Yeah, we know that, all right—at least, I know who one of 'em was. The leader, that big, dark-faced wolf with the handlebar mustache, is named Jess Drum, and he's a rigger with the Red Pine lumber syndicate. They own loggin' property up there on the slopes in the northern end of the basin. Mebbe the others was lumberjacks, too, I don't know."

"Men don't try to kill without reason," the Masked Rider said bluntly. "You know that, don't yuh?"

"Yes, of course," the girl admitted quickly. "And of course there is a reason why they tried to kill us. But my brother told you the truth—we aren't sure what that reason is."

"But yuh suspect the reason?"

Again Hugh and Starr looked at each other. Plainly there was something that made them hesitant to talk—uncertainty, or perhaps fear. The Masked Rider was a good judge of human nature, and he knew that at times it was best to retreat from a given question and return later.

"Yuh're brother and sister?" he asked shrewdly.

"That's right," Hugh Tait readily agreed, and told him their names. "We live on the Star Cross outfit, a few miles to the south. It's a big outfit, biggest in White Bear Basin. More properly, I might say we own the Star Cross, both our parents bein' dead. But, us both bein' under age, the outfit is managed by our guardian and uncle, Adam Tait. I won't be twenty-one till six months from now. Until then, Uncle Adam has charge of the Star Cross."

"But that doesn't explain why lumberjacks—if they were lumberjacks—would try to kill a couple of youngsters," the Masked Rider pointed out.

"I—no, it don't. And like I told yuh, I don't know why." Hugh Tait scowled, with irritation or puzzlement. "I don't like to say too much about it. Somethin' queer's goin' on and I don't know who to trust. For all I know you might be in on it."

THE girl interrupted her brother sharply.

"Hugh!" she exclaimed. "Would the Masked Rider risk his life to help us if he were mixed up with that band?"

"I didn't mean that exactly," Hugh denied. "But you know as well as I do what's been goin' on at the Star Cross."

"No, I don't know," Starr said quietly. "I could only guess, and I don't know what to guess." She turned smilingly to the black-garbed rider. "I'm sorry if we seem all mixed-up, and ungrateful. Believe me, we're not ungrateful. It's just that—well, we're not sure ourselves. You understand?"

"Mebbe I do." The Masked Rider swung quickly into the saddle. "And mebbe, next time I see yuh, there'll be more that can be told."

"You aren't leaving White Bear Basin?" Starr asked quickly.

"Not for a while," he assured her. "Not till I find out why somebody wants a certain cowboy and"—his strong white teeth flashed in a smile beneath the domino mask—"a mighty pretty girl killed."

Color stained her face. "Then I'll feel better, because now I know which stories I've heard about the Masked Rider are true!"

The Robin Hood rider lifted his hand, wheeled the black and rode away without looking back, followed closely by Blue Hawk on the gray. They vanished quickly over the low ridge.

An hour later, and several miles to the north, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk halted in a small timber-hemmed clearing beside a narrow but swift-flowing stream. Packs and camping gear lay on the moss-covered ground. They picketed the black stallion and the gray in a nearby grass patch, which already held a long-legged, hammerhead roan and a wiry pinto, and returned to the camp site. By now the sun was setting in a wild blaze of color.

While the Yaqui kindled a fire, the Masked Rider doffed the black cape, mask and sombrero, changing quickly into levis, a gray shirt and a battered brown sombrero. Within seconds, the mysterious Masked Rider became Wayne Morgan, drifting cowhand.

He was tall, powerful, yet lean as a cougar. Without the mask his features showed rugged and brown, with wide lips that seemed always ready to grin good-naturedly.

"Work for us in White Bear Basin, Senor?" the Yaqui asked casually, as he dumped bacon into a sizzling skillet.

"That seems plain, doesn't it, Hawk?" Wayne Morgan said, grinning covertly at the Yaqui's feigned indifference. "There's always work for us wherever death is in the saddle, as it seems to be here. We don't know what's happenin', but that'll come later. We'll sleep on it tonight."

But they slept little that night.

It was late, well after midnight, when they were aroused by gunshots. A grayish mist lay along the river and a strong, chill wind moaned among the trees. The shots rode this wind out of the north—quick, explosive sounds that beat swiftly and violently upon each other.

Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk were instantly awake. They threw aside their blankets and sat up, tense and wary, with Morgan fumbling on the ground beside him for his gun-belts.

Six shots drummed out, all a six-shooter would hold, followed by a short silence. Wayne Morgan and the Yaqui got to their feet, on their faces an awareness of something amiss. Those shots had not been deliberate, wide-spaced. They had been close-spaced, staccato, like those a man fires when he is gripped by unreasoning terror.

The Yaqui glanced inquiringly at Morgan.

"Somebody's in trouble," Morgan declared tersely. "The same man fired all them shots. If it was a gunfight—"

He broke off abruptly. Another sound had come from the same direction as the shots—the high, thin scream of a man. The sound was filled with terror, or pain, or both. It came again, and again, shrill

and quavering, slashing through the night like a knife shredding a dark blanket.

Blue Hawk crossed himself.

"*El Diablo* himself is most certainly abroad this night," he muttered. "What do you make of it, Senor?"

Morgan's head moved jerkily. He had heard men scream like that before, men who faced death in its most horrible form, and were afraid. Men from whom all hope had fled.

THE screams continued for what seemed like two or three minutes. Then they gradually subsided, finally dying away altogether, leaving an unnatural hush in the night.

"Poor devil," Morgan said softly. "Whoever he was, I reckon he's done for."

"But if he died, Senor, what could have been the cause ?"

"I don't know. I never heard anything quite like it before. It was like—well, like a man bein' slowly strangled to death."

"Maybe I had better have what you call the look-see?" suggested the Yaqui.

"Yeah, do that, Hawk. Mebbe it ain't too late to help. But be careful. Somethin' bad is happenin' here."

Blue Hawk, with only his long-bladed knife for a weapon, vanished silently into the shadows. Morgan, stepped out of the red circle of light cast by the dying fire, placing his broad back against the bole of a big pine. He stool there, gun in hand, straining ears and eyes.

There was no sound except the noisy voice of the river and the moaning of the wind through the trees. But with those weird screams still echoing in his ears, Wayne Morgan sensed something evil and sinister in the night. Was this, he wondered, tied in with the events of the afternoon before?

He tensed suddenly. There was movement out there in the dense timber, and it was drawing in toward the fire—the rustle and swish of branches, the harsh, uneven breathing of a man. Had Blue Hawk, too, fallen victim to the unknown peril?

A figure stumbled into the dim firelight. Morgan saw instantly that it was not the Yaqui, however. It was a young, red-haired man in puncher's garb.

The clothes were ripped and torn as if the man had been in a terrific struggle. His wide eyes were terror-filled, and blood trickled from the corners of his mouth. He stood braced on wide-spread legs, staring straight ahead.

Morgan stepped from behind the tree. He was, he knew, looking at a man the same as already dead. He stepped forward and took hold of the puncher's arm. The red-haired fellow turned his head slowly then, and stared with blank, empty eyes at Morgan, as if not seeing him at all.

"Take it easy, friend," Morgan said gently, soothingly. "Yuh're all right now. I'm yore friend. What happened?"

"Tried to get away—but it caught me," the puncher mumbled hoarsely. "Emptied my gun at it. Big snake—big as a tree."

The cowboy slumped suddenly, and Morgan caught him in his arms and lowered him gently to the ground. A quick examination showed that the man was dead. Morgan crouched there beside him, puzzled by the man's queer words, feeling a sense of unreality. He pulled open the dead puncher's torn shirt, searching for a sign of some wound. But there was no sign of bullet or knife wound.

Instead, the man's whole body was ringed with livid welts that were already turning purple! There were signs that his ribs had been caved in.

This man, Wayne Morgan realized with a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, had been crushed to death as if a steel cable had been wrapped about his body and slowly tightened. The evidence was unmistakable. And yet, such a thing was incredible, fantastic.

Morgan straightened suddenly, whirled, twin guns leaping into his hands. But it was only Blue Hawk who had come silently into the firelight. The Yaqui's eyes, riveted on the dead man, were wide and glowed strangely. His usually inscrutable face, to Morgan's shrewd eyes, showed an unaccustomed excitement.

The Indian, shifting his gaze from the still figure, quickly gathered dead branches from the ground and tossed them onto the glowing coals. The fire blazed up brightly. Blue Hawk glanced quickly about the clearing. He seemed tense, jumpy as a cat. Morgan, watching his trailmate, knew that the Yaqui was

under some great strain. He waited for Blue Hawk to speak.

"The man who screamed, Senor?" the Indian finally asked.

Morgan nodded. "I think so. He was the same as dead when he got here. What did yuh find, Hawk?"

"I found," the Yaqui said slowly, "signs on the earth which said there had been some kind of struggle."

"But yuh didn't see anybody?"

"Nobody, Senor. But I saw something."

PUZZLED by his friend's queer words and actions. Morgan asked sharply, "What did yuh see?"

"What I saw, Senor, does not make sense. I fear you will not believe me, and I am not certain I myself believe it."

"I've never doubted yore word!"

Blue Hawk had been educated in a mission school, learning the white man's ways and wisdom. But he remained an Indian, and the superstition of his ancestors was in his black eyes now.

"I saw a snake, Senor," he said slowly. "A snake of great length and size, and it glowed like a bluish flame as it wriggled away into the brush. I did not follow it, nor try to kill it. I quickly left the spot!"

Morgan was quiet a moment, feeling the hairs rise on the back of his neck. His gaze shifted to the dead man.

"This hombre," he said quietly, "was crushed to death—by some kind of coils wrapped about his body."

"I had seen that, Senor. Then you do not doubt that I saw the snake?"

"I don't doubt that yuh saw what looked like a huge snake, at least. How long would yuh say it was?"

"Twenty feet, perhaps longer. And thick as a small man's thigh. I saw it plainly even in the dark."

"There is no snake in America that big—except in captivity, that is—and none that glows in the dark. Unless—"

He broke off, his narrowed eyes going again to the dead puncher.

In following the danger trails over the West the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had matched wits and courage with many mysteries, but none more bizarre than

"Take one more step, hombre," Morgan said lazily, "and you'll step clean into purgatory!" (CHAPTER V)

this. None that on the surface seemed more sinister, or more filled with evil. Wayne Morgan's rugged jaw set stubbornly and anger darkened his eyes.

"I don't *sabe* what we're up against, Hawk," he said slowly. "But I know it's somethin' bad, and we'll find out what's behind it. There are explanations for everything—some of 'em powerful surprisin'—and there's an explanation for this."

"You intend to take the trail of the blue snake?" asked Blue Hawk.

"Or the trail of whoever's behind it. There's nothin' we can do tonight. But with daylight we'll investigate. Then I'll have to take this dead man into town and turn the body over to the sheriff."

"It will be hard to explain how he died."

Morgan shrugged. He would not cross that stream until he came to it, and then events would decide his course.

"One of has better stand watch till mornin'," he said.

"I will stand watch, Senor," the Yaqui offered. "If I slept, I am afraid my dreams would be evil!"

CHAPTER III

Pipe-organ Canyon

AT DAYBREAK the wind still blew strongly. It churned the heavy mist, making it look like a soggy gray curtain flapping in a gale. Morgan and Blue Hawk ate in the weird half-light, talking little. The events of a few hours seemed unreal.

But the still figure on the ground, covered with a rock-weighted blanket, was mute, stark evidence of their reality.

After eating, they saddled the hammer-headed roan and the pinto, mounted and rode through the dripping timber to the spot where the night before Blue Hawk had found signs of a struggle—and had seen what looked like a gigantic blue snake. Morgan knew that the Yaqui never lied, and that the Indian was seldom mistaken.

The signs were there, plain in the soft earth. Boot prints, for the most part—deep, ragged imprints that had gouged and slashed the earth. Marks such as a man would make when he was in a desperate death struggle. Looking at the signs gave Morgan an eerie feeling. There was only one set of boot prints.

But there were other dim signs. Signs that might have been made by the looping coils of a giant snake!

Marks showed where the dazed puncher had staggered away from the spot toward the campfire. Blue Hawk pointed out the spot where he had seen the glowing snake vanish into the underbrush. And there, dim but unmistakable in the dust, were those same crooked, snakelike marks!

"These marks," Morgan said grimly, "were made by a snake, a mighty big snake. And that snake killed a man. There's no other explanation."

"But a snake that glows like a blue flame in the dark, Senor. How do you explain that?"

"I don't. A luminous or phosphorescent paint would glow in the dark. The whole thing's crazy. But it's here, and we've got to find out what's behind it. Let's see if we can follow these marks. We'll leave the hosses here."

Both Morgan and the Yaqui were expert trackers, and at first following the queer marks was not difficult. Two hundred yards from the spot of the struggle, Blue Hawk suddenly pointed.

"Boot prints, Senor."

The boot marks were plain enough, running parallel to the snakelike imprints.

"Looks like a man joined up with the snake here," Morgan grunted. "Almost like he was leadin' the critter. But that's crazy too, ain't it?"

They followed the trail for perhaps another quarter of a mile. Then, abruptly, the earth became hard and rocky so that no sign at all showed. Towering cliffs loomed directly before them. And slashing through these cliffs was the narrow mouth of a canyon out of which the river roared and tumbled.

Through the canyon mouth, narrow rock ledges extended along each side of the stream. Inside the narrow pass, the canyon broadened to perhaps two hundred yards. The wind, funneling between the towering rock walls of the pass, made a moaning, unearthly sound.

Although no marks at all showed on the rocky earth here, it was apparent that the trail of the man and the snake entered the canyon. Without hesitation, Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk followed the trail, skirting one of the rock ledges that bordered the river. Although the sun was by now well into the sky, its rays had not yet penetrated the mist.

Here inside the canyon mouth the mist was even heavier, boiling in a blue-gray spray up from the leaping water that dashed itself against huge boulders. The booming roar was like the continuous roll of giant drums that beat back from the dripping black walls towering above them.

The pass was less than fifty yards long. Then it widened abruptly, and before them lay the canyon, the floor of which was covered with boulders and underbrush and gnarled trees. Rising above these stunted trees were numerous queerly-shaped cliffs and slender, dagger-like rock spires. The walls on each side of the canyon seemed sheer and unscalable.

Inside the pass, they searched for signs of the trail they had lost, but without success. The earth was shaly and flint-like. They went farther into the canyon, searching the ground carefully, their eyes and ears at the same time alert for danger. For, although they neither saw nor heard anything to substantiate the feeling, both were certain that evil and danger lurked here in this weird place.

A MAN and a monstrous snake had entered the canyon. Probably they still were here. What else lurked among the fantastically carved walls and needle-like rock spires?

A wind blew spasmodically through the canyon, like the breath of a giant in troubled sleep. At times it died away completely, leaving a complete silence. And then the howling gusts rushed in suddenly through the pass, making a sound like weird pipe organ music among the walls and spires, hammering and slashing violently at the gnarled trees.

At first the sounds among the spires were low, like the beginning of tremendous music played by a master. And then the murmur became a mighty, wordless chant that carried utter paganism in its bellowing echoes.

"Nice, spooky place," Morgan mused. "Mebbe what yuh saw, Hawk, was only a snake's ghost, and it lives here with all the other ghosts. Only I never heard of a ghost, snake or otherwise, killin' a man!"

The Yaqui crossed himself again, said nothing.

They followed the canyon for perhaps a mile, until it again narrowed abruptly and the river plunged out between dripping black walls. Then they retraced their course. But they found nothing to indicate that they were not the first humans ever to set foot in this weird, seemingly lost corner of the world.

They went back through the pass.

"But something tells me we ain't seen the last of this place," Wayne Morgan declared. "We'll be comin' back, I reckon. But we'll have to catch that coon before we skin it. We'll go back to camp, and than I'll head for town with that puncher."

"Smoke, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly, pointing to the crest of a nearby timbered ridge.

They had just left the canyon, and on each side of them, paralleling the river's course, was a high dark ridge. The mist had thinned considerably and fingers of yellow sunlight were pushing through. Morgan lifted his eyes, following the Yaqui's pointing finger, and there atop the highest ridge he saw a thin plume of smoke spiraling upward.

He could not see the source of the smoke, but guessed that it came from a cabin, or possibly a campfire, atop the ridge. He gazed at it thoughtfully, and made his decision.

"We can't afford to overlook any bets," he told Blue Hawk. "You wait here, while I take a look-see."

The Yaqui nodded, and Morgan began the climb up the steep, timbered slope. The ridge, he quickly discovered, was rough, and much higher than he had first thought. His leg muscles were aching by the time he reached the crest.

Guided by the smoke, moments later he stood at the edge of a clearing at the crest of the flat-topped peak. In the clearing was a log cabin. On two sides of the clearing the ridge fell away sharply, giving an unobstructed view of the surrounding country. There was no mist

here. The sun shone down brightly and warmly.

At one side of the cabin, on a high rock promontory, stood a man. His back was turned to Morgan, and apparently he was not aware of the tall cowboy's presence. Surprise touched Morgan. Not at the man himself, but at what he was doing. He was painting, and was wholly engrossed in his work.

The man was tall, slim-waisted, and broad-shouldered. His uncovered hair was raven-black, curly, tinged with gray at the temples. He was dressed in ordinary denims and checked woolen shirt open at his throat. Before him was an easel containing a half-finished picture. In his hands were palette and brushes. Morgan, watching him, saw that his strokes at the canvas were swift, deft, yet delicate and sure.

Despite his surprise, Morgan was aware of disappointment. He had hoped for some clue that would help to solve the mystery he was trying to unravel. Instead, he had found an artist. His first impression had been that it was a queer spot to find an artist. But it was, in fact, ideal. For, stretching on three sides, as far as the eye could reach, was in incredible panorama of unsurpassed beauty.

Morgan jumped suddenly, as the man spoke without turning.

"Welcome, my friend. I have few visitors here. I will be with you in a moment."

"Yuh haven't turned yore head," Morgan said curiously. "How'd yuh know I was here?"

THE man laughed, a deep, pleasant sound.

"I heard you, far down the slope. Only a human would be so careless as to make so much noise. My name is Jeffrey Blalock. Most people call me Jeff, which I approve of."

"I'm Wayne Morgan. I saw the smoke from yore cabin from below, and was curious. I didn't know the cabin was here."

"A stranger in White Bear?" asked Jeffrey Blalock.

"Might say that. Just a fiddle-footed cowhand, honin' to see what's over the next hill."

"A pleasant and laudable ambition, and profitable, because the riches one gains in such manner are stored away inside you where they cannot be foolishly squandered. Do you agree?"

"I reckon yuh're right," Morgan agreed. "Well, I didn't mean to butt in."

"Not at all!" Blalock turned suddenly, smiling, and placed palette and brushes on a flat rock. "After that climb, you must be thirsty. A drink of cool water, perhaps—or wine?"

"I could do with a drink of water," Morgan admitted, and watched as Blalock stepped inside the cabin and reappeared almost instantly with a pail and wooden dipper.

The painter, he now saw, although perhaps middle-aged, was remarkably handsome. His features were brown, high-cheeked, intelligent. His dark eyes seemed to glow with an inward fire. His hands were long-fingered, his bare arms muscular.

"You are surprised at finding a painter here?" Blalock suggested smilingly.

"I reckon not, though I was at first," Morgan said truthfully. "Looks like it'd be a pretty lonesome place, though."

"Lonely?" the artist gestured broadly with an arm. "Look out there, and tell me what you see, my friend."

Morgan looked, and saw a scene of rugged, breathtaking beauty. Behind the cabin the timbered foothills rose tier on dark tier, until they broke like black waves against the blue of the sky. Below, lower hills rolled away, mist-shrouded, their wetness giving them a silvery sheen in the early sunlight. There were the ragged walls and spires, like shark's teeth, and the river winding like a white thread over dark cloth. Here, where it seemed to wash the sky, the wind was clean and cool.

"Lonely?" the artist said again, a far-away dreamy look in his brilliant eyes. "A man can never be lonely where there is such beauty. And I have found far more than beauty here. I have found contentment. Here there is no greed or selfishness or wickedness, no violence or ugliness, but only beauty and cleanliness and goodness. Can you say that, my friend, of the places where your fiddle-footed travels have taken you?"

"There's a lot of evil, and violence, wherever I've gone," Morgan said quietly.

"But a lot of beauty and honesty, too. Trouble is, yuh ain't always shore where yuh'll find which."

"Well spoken!" Blalock laughed gently, looking at Wayne Morgan curiously. "And correct, of course. And I see in you, I think, more than appears on the rough surface."

Morgan shrugged, appeared puzzled. Himself well-versed in many subjects, he knew that here was a man who bordered on brilliance. A man who had shut himself away from the world's evil and ugliness, to transfer to canvas its cleanliness and beauty.

It was another half an hour before he left the cabin atop the high ridge, and went slowly and thoughtfully back to the spot below where Blue Hawk anxiously waited.

CHAPTER IV

Coldwater

THE town of Coldwater was little different from scores of other towns Wayne Morgan had seen over the West—twin rows of false-fronted buildings, weather-warped and drab, facing each other across a narrow rutted street. Behind the town was a steep, timbered ridge, and between the buildings and the ridge flowed a small noisy creek.

It was past noon when Morgan rode the hammerheaded roan into Coldwater. Behind the saddle was lashed the stiff, blanket-wrapped body of the dead puncher. His eyes, probing along the street, spotted a sign that said, "Sheriff's Office," and he pulled up and halted at a tie-rack before the building.

As he turned from the rack, a tall, blond, good-looking young man with a star on his shirt front, appeared in the office doorway. His eyes chilled as they shifted from Morgan to the blanket-wrapped figure and back again.

"What yuh got there, feller?" he asked bluntly.

"A dead man," Morgan said, as bluntly.

"You kill him?"

"Nope."

"Who did—and who is he?"

"I don't know, to both questions. You the sheriff?"

"That's right. Name of Bill Condor."

The lawman stepped into the dust and approached the horse. He lifted a corner of the blanket and peered at the face of the dead man, then let it fall quickly back into place. By now a curious crowd was gathering.

"Who is it?" somebody asked.

"Smoky Bean," the sheriff said shortly, and glanced at Morgan. "Help me carry him into my office."

They untied the body, lifted it, carried it into the sheriff's office and placed it on a cot. When the curious spectators would have entered, Sheriff Bill Condor closed the door in their faces after he had ordered one of them to go get Doc Sayers, who was also the coroner.

Then the sheriff looked keenly at Morgan.

"Who are you, and what's yore business?" he asked.

Morgan told him his name, adding, "I'm just driftin' through. Or I might take a

[*Turn page*]

job, if it's the right kind."

"Particular, ain't yuh?" Condor grunted. "All right, tell me how this happened."

"I don't know how it happened." Morgan declared truthfully, having already decided just how much he would tell of what he knew. "I was camped last night beside a river several miles to the northwest of here. Some time in the night I heard shots, and heard a man scream. A while later this hombre here, this Smoky Bean, staggers into my camp. He died almost at once. Did he ride for some outfit here in the basin?"

"For the Star Cross outfit belongin' to the Taits." The sheriff frowned. "Did he say anything before he died?"

"Nothin' that made sense."

"Just where was it yuh say this happened?"

Morgan shrugged. "I told yuh all I know. I'm a stranger here. It was mebbe half a mile below the mouth of a deep canyon that the river flows through."

Condor looked at him quickly. "That would be Pipe-organ Canyon, I reckon. Called that because the wind blowin' through the cliffs makes a sound like organ music. Ain't been more'n a couple of months since another gent—a lumberjack—was found dead near the mouth of Pipe-organ. Funny thing about that. This gent hadn't been shot, or knifed. Doc Sayers said he'd been crushed to death, like mebbe by a big rubber hose bein' tightened about his body!"

Morgan's expression didn't change. "Or by a snake?" he said watching the sheriff closely.

"Well, yeah, only that'd be a crazy idea. This Smoky Bean now, how was—"

The door opened abruptly and a paunchy, bearded little oldster carrying a black satchel came into the room. Doc Sayers nodded curtly to the sheriff and Morgan and went immediately to the body on the cot. He cut away the man's clothing. Sheriff Condor went and stood beside him, watching. Morgan remained seated. He already knew what the examination would reveal.

HE HEARD the young sheriff emit a sharp exclamation. Then there was silence for several moments, until the doctor straightened, turned. There was a puzzled look on the medico's face.

"How would yuh say he died, Doc?" Condor asked.

"He was crushed to death!"

"Yuh shore of that, Doc?"

"Absolutely certain," declared the medico. "His ribs are caved in, several other bones fractured. There's absolutely no sign of any other wound." He looked at Morgan. "You saw this happen?"

Morgan shook his head. "What could have done that crushin', Doc?" he asked.

Doc Sayers hesitated. Plainly he was deeply puzzled, and reluctant to express an opinion.

"It could have been a huge snake, a python, or anaconda," he said finally. "But that, of course, is fantastic. My verdict is that Smoky Bean was crushed to death, by persons or methods unknown. I'll send somebody to take the body across to the undertaking parlor."

He went out, and a moment later two punchers entered, lifted the body and carried it across the street and into another building. During this time both the sheriff and Morgan had remained silent, each obviously busy with his own thoughts.

"Ever heard of any big snakes in this part of the country?" Morgan asked casually.

Condor started violently. "Snakes? Why a few rattlers. None over five or six feet long. What yuh drivin' at?"

"Just curious. Seems queer, two men dyin' in nearly the same spot and in the same way."

"A lot of queer things have happened lately."

"Such as what?"

"Why—" Bill Condor hesitated, shrugged. "Things a stranger like you wouldn't savvy. Some things that ain't funny have happened, too, the last few months. Such as a lot of rustlin' and holdup, durin' which several men have been killed."

"Who's behind all this deviltry?" Morgan asked.

"How'n perdition would I know?" the lawman said irritably. "If I did, I'd know how to stop it. All I know is that there's a big bunch of 'em, and they're plenty smart. I got no idea who's behind it."

"No idea where their hideout is?"

Sheriff Condor shrugged. "I've had ideas, but they didn't pan out. Several

times I've followed tracks close to the entrance of Pipe-organ Canyon, where I lost 'em on the roughs. I've searched the canyon from end to end and drew a blank every time. It's got me buffaloed. The whole basin's ridin' me—a big part of 'em has suffered, in one way or another, and they say I've got to do somethin' or they'll elect a new sheriff come next election day. But cuss it, what can I do when I don't know who to arrest or where to find 'em?"

"This Smoky Bean—he was off Star Cross land, wasn't he? And what would he have been ridin' at that time of night for?"

"Yeah, he was off Star Cross, but I got no idea why, or why he was ridin' at that time of night. Mebbe Adam Tait'd know."

"He own Star Cross?" asked Morgan.

"No," the sheriff said. "Hugh and Starr Tait own it. Adam's their uncle and guardian, and he's managin' the Star Cross till they come of age."

"Some kind of trouble at the Star Cross?" Morgan asked casually.

"I wouldn't say trouble. More of a disagreement. The Red Pine Lumber Syndicate, which has holdin's up above the Star Cross, has been wantin' to build a flume across Star Cross land, and they've offered a good price for the rights. The lumber company's holdin's are up on the slopes of the basin and in the high country along the river in the northern end. A flume across the Star Cross range would give 'em a short cut for their logs and save 'em considerable time and money."

"That's plain enough," Morgan drawled. "But lumberin' and cow raisin' don't mix. Way I see it, the lumber people are clearin' off the watershed of the river and smaller streams that furnish water for the basin.

"If yuh strip that watershed clean, yuh've hurt a lot of good cattle land. When the heavy rains come there'll be bad floods, killin' a lot of cattle. In the dry season, there'll be droughts, and a lot more cattle will die. The lumber people get the profit, the cowmen the losses."

THE sheriff nodded, looking with increased respect at the tall rider.

"That's it exactly," he agreed. "The ranchers in the basin know this. They can't keep the lumber people from cuttin' trees, because the lumber folks own the property. But to build a flume would let 'em cut more trees a heap faster. The ranchers don't want to hurry their own ruin, so they don't want that flume built."

"But Adam Tait does," Morgan said shrewly, "for the money it will bring the Star Cross."

"At first he didn't," Condor told him. "But some time ago, for some reason he changed his mind. He can't do anything about it, though, without the consent of Hugh and Starr. And that's what the disagreement is about. They're sidin' with the other ranchers."

Morgan had seen a rider stop and dismount at the rack before the sheriff's office. This rider came into the office with a jangling of huge silver spurs. He was a slender, flashily dressed man with flaming red hair and a beaklike nose curving downward from between cold, tawny eyes. He nodded to Condor, stared sharply and appraisingly at Wayne Morgan.

"Morgan," the sheriff said, without warmth, "this is my deputy, Red Teak."

"Red" Teak stared again at Morgan with the slightest of nods. "What's this about Smoky Bean bein' killed?" he said to Condor.

"It's a fact."

"How'd he die, and who killed him?"

"Crushed to death, Doc Sayers says. As to who done it, I don't know. Morgan here brought him in."

The sheriff repeated briefly what Morgan had told him.

"And yuh're takin' his word for it?" The dudishly dressed deputy looked flatly at Morgan. "Hombre, yuh shore yuh're tellin' all yuh know about this business?"

Morgan's first impulse upon seeing the deputy had been one of dislike. Now this antagonism increased.

"Point is, are you shore?" he sneered. "Mebbe yuh'd like to jail me, redhead."

"Mebbe I'd like to do more than that," Red Teak flared, "and I will, if yuh get smart! I got no use for saddlebums, especially them as bring in dead men and tell cock-and-bull stories about who killed 'em."

Morgan had got to his feet.

"Yuh talk too much, mister," he said, with deceptive mildness. "Shut up or

I'll twist yore long nose around and tie it to yore backbonnet!"

"Why, you—" Red Teak snarled, and swung a looping right fist at Morgan's head.

But Morgan rolled his head aside, took a quick forward step, drove his own fist into the deputy's flushed face. Teak staggered back against the wall, shook his head, glaring at Morgan. He cursed and grabbed for his gun.

Then he froze motionless, amazement and rage flaring in his tawny eyes as he stared at the gun that had appeared with amazing speed in Wayne Morgan's hand. Morgan's eyes were cold.

"Better forget it, Red" he said flatly. "I'd hate to hurt yuh!"

"Break it up, yuh hellions!" The quick flurry of action had taken the sheriff by surprise, but now he lunged suddenly to his feet, his own gun in hand, anger blazing in his eyes. "Red, yuh asked for what yuh got. And you, Morgan—put up that smokepole and behave yoreself or I'll slam yuh in jail!"

"*Bueno,* Sheriff," Morgan agreed mildly. "Didn't go to start no ruckus. I figger yuh can run yore own office, though."

TEAK pushed himself violently away from the wall.

"Mebbe he won't be runnin' it after next election!" he growled.

Glaring with malignant fury at Morgan he stalked from the office.

"Red's a little quick-tempered," Sheriff Condor said, holstering his gun. "But I reckon he means well."

Morgan shrugged, pouched his own .45. "If yuh don't want me any more, reckon I'll meander out and inhale me some grub."

"Go ahead. But I may want yuh later."

"I'll be about," Morgan said, and went out.

The sun was a white hot globe of fire in the mid-sky when Morgan hit the street. He blinked his eyes hard against the momentary blindness and tilted his sombrero low to shade his face from the glare. It was hot and little beads of silvery perspiration began to form on the cowboy's upper lip. He strode easily along the board sidewalk searching for a place to stow away some chuck. Up the block a sign proclaimed PEDRO'S CHILI—IT'S HOT.

CHAPTER V

Trouble Range

WAYNE Morgan entered the restaurant, ordered ham and eggs and coffee. He ate slowly, remembering the things he had heard and seen, placing each in its proper place. From long experience he had learned to fit incidents, people and bits of talk into a mystery as other men would fit together a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces of this puzzle were just beginning to come to hand, with the most important ones still missing.

The heart of the mystery, he was convinced, was the Star Cross Ranch, with its tentacles apt to reach out in any direction, but especially toward the logging camp in the foothills. And perhaps into weird Pipe-organ Canyon.

Why had Smoky Bean, a puncher on the Star Cross, been killed, and how? Morgan was almost certain that Sheriff Bill Condor was square and could be trusted. But Morgan hadn't mentioned the convincing proof he had that a huge snake was loose in the basin, for the simple reason that the lawman would have hooted at the idea.

Finished eating, Morgan paid for the meal, got up and went out. He paused on the board walk, from habit looking both ways along the street—and suddenly grew tense.

A man and a girl stood on the walk fifty feet away, talking. The girl was Starr Tait. The man was the huge, dark-faced lumberjack, Jess Drum, leader of the men who had tried to kill the girl and her brother the day before.

Starr Tait had a quirt in her hand, and was talking excitedly. Drum was shaking his shaggy head, saying something in a low tone that Morgan couldn't catch, a leering grin on his brutal features. Morgan started walking swiftly toward them.

The girl's voice rose angrily. "You're lying! I saw you plainly, and heard you talk, and I know you're the man. You tried to kill us!"

"Yuh got the wrong man," Drum growled, darting an uneasy glance along the street. "Yuh're just tryin' to stir up trouble. Get out of my way!"

He reached a big hand and shoved the girl into the dust. But she leaped back at him, her face flaming, and slashed him furiously across the face with the quirt. The lumberjack swore, snatched at the quirt, but missed it and caught her arm instead.

Starr fought him furiously, silently, kicking at him with her small boots, trying to claw his face with her free hand. Swearing with startled anger at the fury of her attack, Drum drew back an open palm as if to slap her.

But the blow never landed. Wayne Morgan leaped in like a pouncing cougar, seized the rigger by the shirt front, whirled him with a single tug of his powerful arm that ripped the shirt from top to bottom.

Then, with deliberate ferocity, he hammered his other fist into Jess Drum's snarling face.

Drum's boots hammered the dust as he reeled backward, and then, unable to catch his balance, he sprawled full length. But he was up almost instantly, bellowing like a bull, and rushing at Morgan. But instead of coming in with flailing fists, when he was five feet away he leaped into the air, driving his hob-nailed boots savagely at Morgan's middle.

The blow, had it landed, would have killed Morgan or put him instantly out of the fight. But, although surprised at the tactic, Morgan had learned to guard against all attacks. He leaped sideward, twisting his powerful body out of the path of those slashing boots.

The rigger slammed into the dust again. He rolled, expecting Morgan to leap upon him with his own boots, and clawed to his feet with amazing quickness. But Morgan gave him no time to get set. He bored in relentlessly as Drum regained his feet, his flinty fists battering at the lumberjack's dark face.

Drum tried to cover his face with his elbows. Then he ran at Morgan, reaching grizzlylike arms. Morgan met the rush full. He rammed a knee into Drum's stomach, and when the rigger grunted and lowered his arms, he slammed his fist savagely into his adversary's face again.

Drum went to his knees. He swayed there, his breath coming raspingly from his throat, his head tilted so that he glared up at Morgan murderously. His hand went underneath his tattered shirt, and he got slowly to his feet. Clutched in his hand was long-bladed knife. Stiff-legged, he started shuffling toward Morgan.

MORGAN didn't retreat. He watched the lumberjack, smiling a little. He heard Starr Tait's breathless voice.

"Look out, cowboy! He'll cut you to pieces!"

"Take one more step, hombre," Morgan said then, lazily, "and yuh'll step clean in purgatory!"

Sheriff Bill Condor, plowing across the street, stepped into the breach. He ran between the two, gun in hand.

"Hold up, Drum!" he yelled. "Or I'll cut yuh in two!"

The rigger stopped. Cunning supplanted the wicked anger in his black eyes. He slid the knife back under his shirt.

"I'm not lookin' for trouble, Sheriff," he muttered. "This proddy cowhand started the ruckus."

"That's a fact, Sheriff," declared Red Teak, who had just come up. "I was over there in the funeral parlor and saw it. I figgered he was a troublemaker when I first saw him."

Condor looked at Morgan. "What's this about, Morgan?" he demanded.

Morgan shrugged, but before he could answer Starr Tait said angrily, "He didn't start it! He was only trying to protect me from that—that killer!"

Nobody spoke for a moment. Then the sheriff asked tautly:

"What yuh mean by that, Starr?"

"Yesterday Hugh and I were up in the hills," Starr said swiftly. "We were fired on, and half a dozen men chased us down into the basin. Hugh's horse went lame, and we holed up among some cliffs to make a stand. Those men meant to kill us. They were about to rush us when the Masked Rider and an Indian showed up and drove them off."

"The Masked Rider?" Surprise touched the sheriff's face. "I didn't know he was within five hundred miles of here."

"He is, and he saved my life and Hugh's!" The girl pointed accusingly at Jess Drum. "And there's the leader of that bunch that tried to kill us! I accused him of it a few minutes ago, and he called me a liar."

"I just said yuh was mistaken," Drum

growled, scowling. "What would I want to kill a couple of young 'uns for?"

Through all this Morgan had held his silence, watching the faces of those about him. A mask of cunning had covered Jess Drum's face. Bill Condor seemed puzzled, worried. Red Teak had stepped to one side, watching, saying nothing.

"That's a serious charge, Starr," the sheriff said. "Could yuh swear on oath it was this man?"

The girl hesitated, biting her red lips. "I—maybe I couldn't swear it, but I'm almost certain it was him. I couldn't see too plainly for the dust."

Drum laughed sneeringly. "Yuh want to arrest me, Sheriff?"

"I'd like to," Condor said flatly, "and I'm warnin' yuh, Drum, to walk a straight line from now on. Start anything else in this town and yuh'll be in trouble up to yore neck!"

The rigger laughed again, contemptuously, turned and swaggered away.

"I'm sorry, Starr," Condor said. "But I can't do anything about it unless yuh're shore."

"That's all right, Bill." Starr turned to Morgan, smiling. "Thanks, cowboy. You ride for some outfit in the basin?"

"He's Wayne Morgan," the sheriff said, before the cowboy could answer. "It was him that brought Smoky Bean in."

"Oh!" Starr's face sobered instantly, and her tanned throat worked convulsively as she swallowed. "How terrible—Smoky's death, I mean. He was a good, square boy. Could you tell me about it?"

"I'll be glad to tell yuh what I know," Morgan agreed. He looked suggestively at the curious faces about them.

"I was just starting to ride home," she said. "You don't happen to be riding in that direction, do you?"

Morgan smiled. "Happens I am."

Five minutes later Morgan and the girl took the west trail out of town. She was, Morgan saw, even prettier than he had thought the day before, and she was an expert horsewoman.

HE TOLD her briefly about what had happened the night before, omitting, however, any mention of the huge blue snake which he and Blue Hawk had trailed into Pipe-organ Canyon. When he finished her face was the color of ashes and she was in the grip of some powerful emotion.

"The sheriff tells me Smoky Bean was a Star Cross rider," Morgan said.

She slowly nodded in reply.

"There's a lot that's queer about this," Morgan told her bluntly. "Yuh have any idea why Smoky was ridin' up close to Pipe-organ Canyon, and after midnight?"

"Y-yes, I know why." Morgan looked at her quickly, and saw that there were tears in her eyes. "I—I feel terrible about it, because I feel that I'm partly to blame for his death."

"What do yuh mean?"

"It's rather a long story," Starr declared. "To understand it you'd have to know about some other things. It started, I suppose, about the time the Red Pine Lumber Syndicate asked permission to build a flume across Star Cross land. That was about eight months ago. Hugh and I refused because the loggers were denuding the basin's watershed, and that meant that disastrous floods and droughts would result."

"The sheriff mentioned that," Morgan said. "Only he said that yore uncle was in favor of the flume."

"He is, now. But he wasn't at first. That's the queer part of it—the change in Uncle Adam. Six months ago Uncle Adam made a business trip to Utah. He was rather mysterious about it. He was gone about a month, and when he came back, it was almost as if he were another man. He looked the same. But he seemed to have changed—inside. Always since I could remember he had been kind and even-tempered, always considerate of others. He would do nothing to hurt anybody else."

"And after he came back from Utah?" Morgan insisted.

"As I said, he had changed. At times he seemed almost his old self. Other times, he became surly and quick-tempered, almost cruel. He wanted to be alone, and he treated his old friends so badly that after a visit or two they stopped coming. One day I saw him beat his favorite horse with a club. All this time the lumber people were still after us to build the flume. They'd raised their offer to ten thousand dollars.

"About three months ago, Uncle Adam said he thought we ought to accept the

offer. When Hugh and I still refused, he flew into a rage. Ever since then he's been sullen and angry with us. But they can't build the flume without permission from Hugh and me, and we'll never give it! The other basin ranchers are backing us."

"Yuh're right," Morgan approved. "But how does it tie in with Smoky Bean bein' killed?"

"I was coming to that. For some time—in fact, almost ever since his trip to Utah—Uncle Adam would ride off alone one or two nights a week, and be gone until almost dawn. Naturally, we were curious about this. Hugh and I tried to find out where he went on these rides, but failed. Finally, about two weeks ago, we asked Smoky Bean to help us. We'd grown up with Smoky, and he was almost like a brother to us. He agreed to follow Uncle Adam and try to find out where he went. I suppose it was wrong, spying on him like that. But we were worried about him, and I thought we had a right to know, too."

Morgan only nodded, thoughtfully.

CHAPTER VI

Guns in the Fog

BY NOW, Wayne Morgan and his girl companion were several miles from Coldwater, though they had been riding slowly along the trail. Morgan knew they were near the spot where he should turn north toward the camp beside the river. Blue Hawk would be worried about him.

"I think I *sabe,*" he said to Starr Tait. "Last night, Smoky Bean set out to trail yore uncle. Is that right?"

"Yes!" Starr's breath caught in her throat. "It was almost dawn when Uncle Adam came home. I was awake and heard him. I don't know what happened. But I'm almost certain Smoky's death was connected in some way with those night rides Uncle Adam takes. But Bill—the sheriff—says Smoky wasn't shot, that he was crushed to death. Is that true?"

"That's the way it looked to me," Morgan said gravely.

"But how could that have happened?"

Morgan shook his head. He saw no point in revealing to this girl the frightening facts which he knew, or guessed to be true. Terror had already shadowed her young eyes.

"I don't know," he said. "But I've got a hunch the truth will come to light. Yuh say the Masked Rider is in the basin?"

"Yes. He saved my brother's life and mine yesterday. And he hinted that he intended to stay here until the mystery was cleared up. Do you think he will really try to help us?"

"I shore do." As if at a sudden thought, Wayne Morgan said, "This mornin', up close to the mouth of Pipe-organ Canyon, I ran across a queer gent who said his name was Jeffery Blalock, and that he was an artist. Yuh know him?"

"Yes, of course," Starr said quickly. "I've watched him paint, several times. He's very nice. I like to hear him talk. It must be wonderful to be like that, to see only beauty and goodness in everything. Don't you think so?"

"I reckon," Morgan agreed vaguely. "From his cabin he can look right down into Pipe-organ Canyon and see a lot of beauty. But a Gila monster's pretty, too, or a leopard."

Starr Tait shivered. "That place is evil," she said.

Nothing more was mentioned about Pipe-organ Canyon. Shortly they reached the spot where Wayne Morgan wanted to turn off, so he said good-by to the girl and each rode on, on their separate ways.

Twenty minutes after parting company with Starr Tait, Wayne Morgan approached the hidden camp site beside the river. He gave the low hunting cry of a mountain lion, and was answered almost instantly by a like call. A moment later he rode into the small, cliff-hemmed clearing where Blue Hawk, anticipating his return, had a pot of coffee simmering on a bed of coals.

"Coffee, Senor," the Indian said. "And food, if you are hungry."

It was characteristic of the Yaqui that he ask no questions, but unsaddled and led the rangy roan to the nearby grass patch where he picketed the hammerhead with the other horses. When he returned, Morgan was sipping hot black coffee from a tin cup.

"The pot's boilin', Hawk," Morgan

remarked, and I don't mean the coffee pot!"

"You had trouble about the dead man, Senor?" the Yaqui asked. "With the sheriff?"

"Not with the sheriff. He seemed a square sort of gent, and didn't question my story. His deputy was suspicious, though." He frowned, remembering Red Teak's words and actions, feeling renewed dislike for the fancy-dressing deputy. "Had a little ruckus with a lumberjack. And I found out some things."

Briefly but graphically he related to Blue Hawk what he had seen and heard.

"You think this Jess Drum is the leader of the outlaw band then?" asked Blue Hawk.

"It's too early to make a guess at that," Morgan said. "Drum impresses me as bein' plumb bad, but without too much brains. There's somethin' about Drum that's had me puzzled, though mebbe it don't mean anything.

"What is that Senor?"

"In that ruckus with Drum, his shirt was ripped down the front. And on his chest was a funny kind of tattoo mark—a coiled snake, about two inches high, and it was a dark blue color."

"The blue snake!" exclaimed the Yaqui. It was evident that what he had seen the night before had affected him powerfully. "You think there is some connection between this tattoo mark and the killer snake?"

WAYNE MORGAN shook his head. "We've seen stranger things," he commented. "I'm almost shore that Drum is in some way connected with the deviltry in this valley, just as Smoky Bean's death is. We've got to get to the bottom of this, and mighty quick, or I've got a hunch others will die. Tryin' to kill Hugh Tait and his sister failed yesterday, but the next time it might not."

"What is the next move, then?"

Morgan frowned again, thoughtfully.

"Whoever—or whatever—killed Smoky Bean last night went into Pipe-organ Canyon. And I can't get over the feelin' that whenever the real answer to this is found, it'll be in that canyon. Anyway, it's worth lookin' into." He glanced at the sun. "Sun's almost down, and we couldn't do any good there at night. Early tomorrow we'll have another look-see at Pipe-organ Canyon."

"Will you go as Wayne Morgan, or the Masked Rider?"

"The Masked Rider, I think. We mustn't forget that Wayne Morgan is only a driftin' cowboy, and is not supposed to be too interested in other folks' troubles. . . ."

The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk left camp early the next morning, and before long approached the mouth of Pipe-organ Canyon. Although only a light mist lay along the river, it boiled like smoke out of the narrow pass. The roar of the water as it rushed between the dripping walls was a steady, violent sound.

As they approached the pass, the masked man glanced upward, but the crest of the ridge on which the artist's cabin was built was lost in the curling mists. From this cabin, on a clear day, a good portion of Pipe-organ Canyon would be in plain view. The Masked Rider made a mental note to pay Blalock another visit, if the present excursion proved fruitless.

They didn't leave the horses behind, as they had the day before, but urged them along the narrow rock ledge skirting the river through the pass. Both Midnight, the great stallion, and the Yaqui's gray were as sure-footed as mountain goats. The stallion trod the slippery rocks almost daintily, carrying his black-clad rider through the shadowy, mist-filled pass and into the canyon. The gray followed.

The fog, although not so thick, persisted here in the canyon. It clung to them damply, shifting like a curtain with the slight wind that blew. Showing through it, the oddly-shaped boulders and spires were weird and hostile-looking. In the vast silence that held the place, the horses' hoofs seemed incredibly loud.

Behind the domino mask the tall rider's eyes were cold and wary. As he had before upon entering this place, he experienced an inexplicable, but unmistakable, sense of peril an evil. He knew that this feeling had touched the Yaqui also. Blue Hawk's hand was never far from his rifle, and his black eyes were alert.

The Masked Rider hardly knew what he expected to find in the canyon, if anything. He only knew that the place had a strange, almost irresistible attraction for him. He had ridden these hunches before,

and they had seldom played him false.

But as they progressed along the chasm they saw nothing to rouse their suspicion. The place seemed empty, except for themselves. There was a little wind now, no sounding of the weird strains among the spires and cliffs that had been so pronounced the day before. The sun was by now above the canyon rim and was struggling to pierce the fog. It filled the chasm with a strange golden light.

Suddenly Blue Hawk said softly:

BLUE HAWK

"Someone comes, Senor!"

Directly ahead of them, there was sound that might have been made by a rock clattering down a decline. It made a tinkling crystal-like sound among the spires.

The Masked Rider drew his guns. Instead of seeking a place of concealment, he and the Yaqui stopped their horses and sat motionless.

The figure of a man appeared suddenly before them, seeming to walk through a rift in the fog. The man was afoot, He was bare-headed, and he walked slowly, looking straight ahead of him.

It was, the Masked Rider saw, Jeffrey Blalock, the painter. The Masked Rider watched him, puzzled. What was this man doing in desolate and mist-filled Pipe-organ Canyon?

Apparently Blalock was not yet aware of their presence. He still walked slowly, looking straight ahead, hands clasped behind his back. He seemed to be lost in deep thought, or almost like a man in a trance. There was a look of intense concentration on his sensitive, intelligent features.

ABRUPTLY the artist turned his head and looked at the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. He showed no surprise at all.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said pleasantly. "Abroad early, aren't you?"

"No earlier than you," the masked man said, holstering his guns. Not wishing to have it suspected that, as Wayne Morgan, he had met Blalock before, he asked bluntly, "Who're you, and what're yuh doin' here?"

Blalock smiled. "My name is unimportant. But I am a painter of sorts. As to why I am here—an artist worth his salt searches always for beauty, and that

should answer your question. Can you imagine a place more beautiful than this?"

" A matter of opinion," said the masked man. "Some folks might say even a snake is beautiful."

"A snake?" Blalock looked sharply at the black-garbed man. "A peculiar expression, my friend. But yes. I dare say there is beauty even in a snake. But that beauty, I'm afraid, would be difficult to transfer to canvas. Those viewing it would see only the snake's evil and hate, and so ignore the beauty. Unfortunately it is so in many instances."

"What else have yuh seen here?" asked the Masked Rider.

"I have looked only for beauty, and so have seen nothing else. Beauty is food and drink for the soul. Ugliness and evil corrupts and corrodes it. A man would be foolish, would he not, to seek that which is self-destroying?" The artist looked again at the Robin Hood rider, seeming to see him fully for the first time. "You are the Masked Rider, aren't you?"

The masked man nodded.

"I have heard of you and your work," said Blalock. "You, like myself, hate wickedness and injustice. But where I choose to ignore these ugly facts—flee from them, if you wish—you choose to combat and destroy them. But surely there is no evil here."

"Mebbe not," the Masked Rider said curtly. "But if I was you, hombre, I'd look for beauty on higher ground, and do my walkin' there too!"

Blalock looked slightly surprised. "Evil cannot walk where there is so much of peace and beauty."

"But it might crawl!" the masked man said shortly. "That's just my advice. Take it or leave it, *amigo*. We'll ride on Hawk!"

He spoke softly to the big stallion and the riders moved away from the artist. When they were fifty feet away the Masked Rider glanced back. Blalock still stood motionless, frowning puzzledly as he stared after them. Then the painter shrugged, turned and went slowly on, toward the mouth of the canyon.

"A strange man, Senor," Blue Hawk offered.

"And a dumb one, it seems." The Masked Rider shrugged, as if dismissing Blalock from his mind. . . .

The first shot came without warning, the bullet snarling out of the mist from a spot off to their left, followed instantly by the familiar crash of a rifle. The bullet tugged at the brim of the masked man's black sombrero.

The stallion reared, whirled, startled by the gunshot. The black guns seemed to leap into the Masked Rider's hands. Deep-throated thunder rolled from their flame-tipped muzzles and along the canyon, as he drove three quick shots at the spot where he had seen a tongue of gun-flame spear through the mist.

"Back, Hawk!" he ordered sharply. "Into them cliffs over yonder!"

The hoofs of Midnight and the Yaqui's gray hammererd the flinty earth as they swerved and drove in among a nest of low cliffs. The rifle cracked again, and again, the bullets hissing like angry hornets about them. Then they slid in behind an intervening wall, getting it between them and the hidden gunman. They leaped to the ground, guns in hand.

It was not the nature of the Masked Rider and his Yaqui trailmate to dodge a fight, nor was that their intention now. But they were on strange ground, and they had no way of knowing how great were the odds against them. For almost certainly the rifleman who had fired upon them was not alone.

Now the gun was silent, and in the silence a voice yelled:

"It's the Masked Rider! I told yuh he'd cause trouble if we didn't hunt him down!"

"Yuh get him?" demanded another voice, farther back.

"Can't be shore, but I don't think so. There's two of 'em. They got in among them walls. Come on up, you hombres—hurry!"

BLUE HAWK'S rifle blasted as he fired, aiming at the spot where the voice had sounded, for the mist had swirled in thicker. The unseen gunman's words broke off abruptly, and he swore, shrilly and bitterly.

The guns out there opened up now, at least half a dozen of them, flame from their muzzles showing redly through the fog. Lead slashed into the walls about the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk. The masked man crouched, holding his fire, heedless of the danger to himself as he

raised his eyes above a boulder. He wanted to see those men out there, if possible.

Here was proof, he knew, that Pipe-organ Canyon was in some way connected with the sinister mystery of White Bear Basin, probably even its focal point. Honest men would not be abroad in this place, nor would they fire without warning upon other men.

Perhaps thirty minutes had elapsed since the masked man and Blue Hawk had met the artist, Blalock, and now they were deep in the roughest section of the canyon. The rain-carved walls and spires loomed weirdly about them.

Questions ran through the alert mind of the Masked Rider. Why were these men here in Pipe-organ Canyon? Where had they come from, and where were they headed? Yesterday's search had failed to reveal any sign of a hideout.

The gunfire had slackened out there, but now it was renewed, more intense and savage than ever. The bullets sounded like hailstones against the rock walls, and the explosions were like the continual roll of drums, the Titanic sounds bouncing and bellowing wildly among the walls and spires.

"All right, you buckos—let's go!" a bull-like voice cried.

There was a quick, violent pounding of hoofs against the hard ground. The sounds became louder, closer, the drumming gunfire more intense and deadly. And then, sweeping like ghost horsemen out of a gray world, half a dozen riders plunged suddenly out of the fog. At their head was a lanky, wolf-faced hombre.

Bent low in their saddles, their guns blazing, they rode in a headlong charge straight at the Masked Rider and the Yaqui!

CHAPTER VII

Trail of Blood

FROM experience, the Masked Rider knew that it was unlike outlaws, however courageous, to expose themselves to hot lead recklessly. This sudden wild charge surprised him.

"Looks like showdown, Hawk," he said calmly. "Make every bullet count!"

Deliberately he raised his twin black guns. Their deep-toned thunder stormed through the cliffs and spires. Beside him, the Yaqui's rifle cracked. One of the riders reeled in his saddle, almost plummeted to the ground, but grabbed at the saddle-horn and pulled himself upright again.

"They are running away, Senor," Blue Hawk said quietly.

For, instead of continuing that headlong charge, the riders had suddenly swerved their horses to the left and toward a line of cliffs. Firing their guns wildly, they quickly gained the shelter of these cliffs. Silence came swiftly to the canyon, except for the receding clatter of hoofbeats as the killer crew fled toward the canyon mouth. Soon these sounds also had died away.

"We follow them, Senor?" the Yaqui asked eagerly.

The Masked Rider shook his head.

"It wouldn't be any use. They've already got into the fog, even if the odds wasn't too great. Once out of the canyon, they'll probably scatter, anyway."

"The leader of this gang was not the lumberjack, Jess Drum?" asked the Yaqui.

"No. I don't think he was in the bunch. None of these rode or looked like a lumberjack. More like common range toughs. Looks like we're gettin' nowhere fast."

"What is the next move then?"

The Masked Rider was silent a moment, a thoughtful frown furrowing his brow above the domino mask. The Yaqui waited, also silent, ready to accept without question any decision the Robin Hood rider made. He knew that this black-clad Nemesis of badmen, although often momentarily balked by those he fought, had never failed to win out in the end.

"We'll leave the canyon for now," the Masked Rider decided. "I'm more than ever shore there's somethin' mighty bad and evil here, and I aim to find out what it is. But I doubt if we could find out much in this mist. And mebbe, after they get through the pass, them hombres that just left here will leave some kind of sign we can follow. If we can capture one of 'em mebbe it'll give us just the lead we need."

They remounted and rode slowly back along the canyon, wary-eyed for a possible ambush. But apparently the bushwhack bunch had left the canyon. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk rode back through the misty, thunder-filled pass. At its outer end, the Yaqui suddenly pointed to the rocky earth.

"Look, Senor—blood!"

The Masked Rider quickly swung to the ground, his keen eyes studying the crimson splotch on the rocks. It was unmistakably blood. The tall rider's gaze shifted, probing the ground. Twenty feet farther on, he saw another splotch.

"Here's sign, all right," he said grimly. "And one we can follow. Either one of the men, or his hoss, is bleedin' pretty bad. If it's the man, he'll have to stop before he goes far, and get patched up .That may be our chance."

"We both follow this sign then?"

"I'll know in a minute. Let's have a look-see."

They scouted the vicinity thoroughly, careful not to obliterate the blood sign. They followed the splotches for two hundred yards over the rocks between the two timbered ridges, until the earth grew less rocky. Then the hoofprints of two horses became plainly visible.

"The others must have scattered onto the ridges as soon as they left the pass," murmured the masked man. These two. . . No, here's where they parted company, too."

Reading sign, they saw that one of the horses had abruptly swerved to the left and entered a belt of timber, while the other—the wounded horse, or the one that carried a wounded rider—continued straight ahead.

The Masked Rider made a quick decision.

"I'll follow the blood splotches. You trail the other rider. That ought to double our chances to find out somethin'. Grab him if yuh can, and bring him to the campsite. I'll meet yuh there as soon as possible."

He lifted his hand and rode slowly on along the swale, his eyes riveted to the ground, while Blue Hawk swung to the left and was lost to view as he entered the dense timber.

The Masked Rider, like his Yaqui trailmate, was an expert tracker and so had little difficulty in following the trail he was now on. After following the course of the river for a short distance the blood-marked trail swung abruptly to the right, where the rider had forded the stream at a shallow spot, far beyond the the blood trail continued westward toward the higher hills. The masked man followed at a leisurely gait, eyes alert and watchful for treachery, hands never far from the black-butted guns.

At times the trail led across small streams, or clung to the rocky floors of ravines, and it was obvious that the rider was trying to throw any possible pursuit off his trail. But he couldn't, or didn't, hide the splotches of crimson, and this led the Masked Rider to decide that it was the horse and not the man that was wounded.

Half an hour later, on the edge of the foothills, he came to the end of the trail. Warned by the whinny of a horse, he halted the stallion, dismounted, and went forward afoot. Soon he stood at the edge of a cedar-hemmed clearing on which stood a log cabin ranchhouse, a corral, and several sheds. The place looked ill-kept and rundown.

At first the masked man saw no sign of life, except for several scrawny cows in the corral. Then a man came from the rickety barn, leading an unsaddled horse. The horse was sweat-drenched, and limped badly on one foreleg.

The man leading the horse was lanky, hawk-faced, evil-eyed—the same man who had ridden at the head of the bushwhack crew in Pipe-organ Canyon a short while before!

As the man left the barn he darted quick, nervous glances to the right and left. Quickly he led the limping horse across the clearing, to a spot no more than twenty yards from where the Masked Rider crouched, jerked the bridle from the horse's head, and whipped the wounded beast savagely across the rump with the reins. He followed the startled horse for several yards, slashing it with the bridle reins, yelling shrilly.

Obviously he was fearful that he had been followed, and didn't want to have to explain the presence of a wounded, sweat-covered horse on the place.

Anger at the lanky man's vicious cruelty lifted inside the Masked Rider.

Gun in hand, he stepped from the cedars.

"That won't help yuh any, hombre!" he said coldly. "But mebbe a good dose of the same medicine would!"

The hawk-faced man stiffened, whirled, cursing viciously. His hand stabbed toward a holstered gun. Then he saw the black-garbed, doomlike figure standing there motionless, saw the long-barreled gun steady in the masked avenger's hand, and his own hand stopped its downward swoop, hovering there like curved talons.

"Go ahead, if yuh want it that way," the Masked Rider invited calmly. "It'd suit me just about as well. I've got no use for bushwhackin' skunks—nor snakes!"

Caution and cunning came to the lanky man's chalky eyes.

"I don't know what yuh mean," he said. "Yuh just give me a scare, is all, poppin' up like that. Who are yuh, and what yuh want?"

"I'll ask the questions," the Masked Rider said grimly. "And you know who I am. What's yore name?"

"Bill Jaguars, if it makes any difference to you."

"Yuh live here alone?"

"Mebbe; mebbe not. Listen, Masked Rider, if yuh think—"

"Thought yuh didn't know who I was? Jaguars, whether yuh know it or not, yuh're standin' right on the edge of purgatory. Lyin' won't save yuh. Only thing that might is straight talk."

"What yuh want to know?" Jaguars asked sullenly.

The Masked Rider stepped farther into the clearing and approached Jaguars. Twenty feet from the man, he again paused. He stood with the barn on his left, the cabin to his right and slightly behind him. He was gambling that the slab-bodied Jaguars was here alone.

"I want to know several things. First, though, we'll start with what yuh was doin' in Pipe-organ Canyon a little while ago."

"What was you doin' there? Reckon one gent's got as much right there as another, ain't he?"

"That's what I want to find out."

"Yuh won't find out anything from me, Masked Rider!" defied Jaguars. "What business is it of yores what happens hereabouts?"

"I'll find out, or kill yuh!" The Masked Rider's voice was flat, relentless. "It's my business, the only business I have, to ferret out evil and killin's, and see that justice is done. And seems like there's plenty of the first two, and room for plenty more of the other, in White Bear. Who's behind all this deviltry?"

"What deviltry?" Jaguars' pale eyes were calculating, jeering. "I don't know anything about any deviltry. I'm an honest, law-abidin' rancher."

"I reckon yuh don't know anything about the snake that killed Smoky Bean, either, do yuh?" the Masked Rider shot at him. "Nor where its den is in Pipe-organ Canyon?"

THE mockery left Jaguars' eyes now and they narrowed with quick wariness. He wet his lips nervously. The man was sharply on guard, and there was something crawling in the depths of his eyes that was wholly wicked and desperate.

"I thought yuh was loco, and now I know it," he said harshly. "I don't know nothin' about no snake, nor how Smoky Bean died. He worked for Adam Tait, didn't he? Mebbe Tait could tell yuh. Why don't yuh ask him, instead of pesterin' other folks?"

"I'm askin' you! Yuh're mixed up in this somehow, and I'm gettin' to the bottom of it. You know why somebody wants Hugh Tait and his sister Starr killed, and I'm givin' yuh just thirty seconds to—"

"And I'm givin' you a slug in the back, pronto, if yuh don't drop that gun!" a guttural voice snarled from the direction of the cabin.

The Masked Rider reacted instantly. He leaped to one side, half whirling in midair, his gun muzzle swinging. He raked the cabin with a stabbing, encompassing glance, expecting to hear the roar of a gun and the slashing snarl of a bullet.

But no gun blasted, and that flashing glance showed him absolutely no sign of life. Instantly, he realized that he had been tricked. He slammed his boots against the ground, bracing his powerful body, trying desperately to swing his gun muzzle back to cover Bill Jaguars.

Jaguars stood half-crouched, a snarl of fury and vicious triumph pulling his lips.

His gun had already cleared leather, was rising. The Masked Rider saw flame and smoke spear out from the gun-muzzle, heard its bellow.

But Jaguars had fired hastily. The Masked Rider felt the fiery breath of the bullet as it grazed his throat. Then his own gun blazed and roared. He felt regret, even as he pulled the trigger. Not only because he always regretted having to take life, however evil that life was, but because he had hoped to gain real information from this man.

But he knew that the odds were against Jaguars' next shot missing. It was his life or the lanky killer's. He saw surprise and unbelief supplant the triumph in Jaguars' pale eyes. Jaguars' chin fell forward on his chest and then he tumbled stiffly forward to the ground and lay still.

The Masked Rider stared through curling gun-smoke down at the dead man, knowing how near he himself had been to dying. Quite obviously Jaguars had at one time been more than a two-bit rancher. He had been a ventriloquist, and a clever one!

For it been Jaguars' own voice, seemingly emanating from the cabin, that the Masked Rider had heard—and it had thrown him off guard almost long enough to prove fatal!

CHAPTER VIII

Sign of the Serpent

MOVING forward, the Masked Rider stooped over the still figure. Jaguars had been shot in the stomach and death had been almost instantaneous. The masked man slowly unbuttoned the dead killer's soiled gray shirt, exposing his chest.

With eyes that held sharp interest, but little surprise, he stared at the tattoo mark on Jaguars' chest. It was a coiled blue snake, about two inches in height—exactly the same mark he had seen on the chest of the lumberjack Jess Drum!

The Masked Rider stared a long moment at the mark which, despite its smallness, was remarkably lifelike. The wedge-shaped head seemed almost to sway, the forked tongue to dart back and forth. Malignant evil was plain in the pin-point eyes. Beyond the fact that it was not a rattlesnake, the Robin Hood rider couldn't tell what kind of reptile it was supposed to be. It bore a marked resemblance to a python, but there were no pythons in America, except in captivity.

But here was further proof, if he had needed it, that there was some kind of organized bunch in White Bear Basin. Obviously this blue snake, tattooed on the chest, was a symbol or badge of membership in the sinister organization. Smoky Bean, whether by design or otherwise, had been one of their victims. Hugh and Starr Tait, the Masked Rider was convinced, had almost been the second and third.

But it went deeper than that. People were not killed haphazardly, or without reason. Some kind of deadly plot was afoot in the basin, and it was aimed at the Star Cross outfit. Powerful, clever forces were behind the plot. There was small doubt that this man, and others whom he knew to be members of the band, were only hirelings.

His eyes grim and determined, the black-garbed rider lifted Jaguars and carried him into the cabin. He laid the dead man on a soiled bed and drew a quilt over him, though he had little time to waste on such a villain, especially one who was now beyond help.

He went back to the thicket where he had left Midnight, mounted the stallion and rode to the east. It was almost noon when he reached the campsite beside the river. The mist had entirely vanished by now and the sun shone brightly. Blue Hawk had not returend to the camp.

Quickly doffing the black cape, mask and sombrero, the tall rider became Wayne Morgan, tophand trouble-shooter. He put coffee on to boil, started preparing a meal.

He had not been in camp long when he heard the low, throaty cry of a mountain lion along the river, and answered in a like manner. Then Blue Hawk rode the gray into the clearing. Instantly Morgan noticed the look of gloom and chagrin on the Yaqui's face. And he saw a smear of blood over one coppery cheek, from a shallow gash across one side of the Indian's forehead.

Wayne Morgan couldn't suppress a grin at the crestfallen look, almost of shame, on his trailmate's features.

"No luck, Hawk?" he asked as the Yaqui dismounted.

"Only bad luck, Senor," Blue Hawk admitted. "I was careless. I let this hombre I was trailing ambush me. I am to blame for my failure."

"I know you too well to think it was yore fault, Hawk." Morgan shook his head. "Looks like he nearly got yuh, though."

"Si," Blue Hawk acknowledged. "The bullet knocked me from saddle, stunning me. By the time I recovered, the killer had disappeared. I followed his trail, but it came to nothing. He entered the main trail that leads to Coldwater, so of course the tracks of his horse mingled with many others."

"Yeah." Morgan grinned wryly. "Well I didn't do so good myself."

Briefly, he told Blue Hawk what had happened.

"The blue snake again!" exclaimed the Yaqui. "What do you make of it, Senor?"

"Little more than I did before. It's right shore that the tattooed snake is a mark of membership in this owlhoot bunch."

"And the snake I—imagined—I saw?"

"It wasn't imagination that killed Smoky Bean," Morgan declared grimly. "That's what we've got to find out about."

"You have a plan, Senor?"

"Just the beginnin' of one. I crave to talk to Hugh Tait again, or his sister. And I hanker to meet their uncle, Adam Tait. There's several things I'd like to have straightened out, and looks like the only way to do it is to go to the Star Cross. Tonight, that's where the Masked Rider is headin'!"

IT WAS almost midafternoon when Hugh Tait reached Coldwater. He left his sorrel at the livery stable for watering and a light feed, and went out onto the plank walk. He started across the street, in the direction of the bank, then changed his mind and stepped back onto the walk.

"Just one mug of cold beer to cut the dust out of my throat," he muttered.

"Just a minute, Hugh!" a voice called.

Young Tait paused, looking up. It was Deputy Sheriff Red Teak who had hailed him. The slender, flashily dressed deputy was angling across the street toward him from the sheriff's office. He walked with a careless, arrogant swagger.

Hugh Tait frowned. In common with many others, he had no liking for the hook-nosed Teak. But he waited, wondering what could be the deputy's business with him.

"In a big hurry, Hugh?" Red Teak drawled.

"No hurry. Figgered I'd go to the Special and cut the dust from my tonsils with some beer."

"And mebbe play some poker?"

Something in Red Teak's voice deepened Hugh's puzzled frown. Teak came up close enough to touch him before stopping. He reached out casually and lifted Hugh Tait's .38 six-shooter from its holster, and stepped back.

Hugh's eyes narrowed "What was the idea of doin' that, Red?" he asked.

"Don't yuh know?" The deputy was grinning coldly. "Yuh're under arrest, Hugh."

The young fellow flushed angrily. His fists balled.

"If that's yore idea of a joke, Red, I don't like it!"

"No joke. Where's the money?"

"What money is that?"

Without answering, Red reached out a slender hand and started feeling over Hugh Tait's clothes in a quick search.

Hugh swore. "Cuss yuh, Red" he snapped, "keep yore paws off me!" He flung the deputy's hand aside. Red was still grinning, without warmth or mirth.

"All right, then, tell me where the money is."

"Yuh mean this?"

Hugh reached into a pocket and pulled out a thick sheaf of bank-notes. Red Teak reached out a hand, but Hugh jerked them back. Red quit grinning suddenly and his tawny eyes narrowed down wickedly.

"Give me that money, kid!"

Slowly, with a growing realization that here was something more serious than he had suspected, Hugh gave him the sheaf of bank-notes.

"Yuh got it, Red." His voice was quiet. "Now what?"

"I hate to do it, kid, but I've got to lock yuh up."

"Not till yuh tell me what this is about!"

"Still want to play games?" Red shook

his head reluctantly. "It won't work. Slim Ordway got into town ahead of you. Yore uncle sent him, with word to arrest yuh."

Naked surprise showed on Hugh's young face. "Arrest me? What for?"

"For lootin' the safe in yore uncle's room at the Star Cross. Wait! Before yuh say yuh didn't do it, I'll bet I can tell yuh just how much is in this roll. Two thousand dollars."

"Of course there's two thousand there! What about it? Look, Red, let's get that straight. Yuh say Uncle Adam sent Slim Ordway into town to get me arrested when I showed up, claimin' I broke into his safe and stole this money?"

"That's right. He says yuh've been gamblin' lately, which I know to be a fact. He says yuh asked him for more money, and when he refused, yuh hit the ceilin' and made some threats."

"That's a rotten lie!" Hugh Tait snapped, his face white. "Shore I've played a little poker, with my own money, and that's my own business. I didn't ask Uncle Adam for any money, and I never made any threats. Either Uncle Adam has lied, or yuh're lyin'. That money—"

"Belongs to Adam Tait personal. It ain't Star Cross money, is it?"

"Of course not. I didn't say it wasn't Uncle Adam's money, because it is. When I started to town, he took it from the safe and asked me to deposit it in the bank for him. I told him I would. I stopped by the L Bar and ate dinner, like I told Uncle Adam I aimed to do, then rode on to town. There's some mistake."

"Mebbe there is."

Red Teak shook his head again, with apparent regret.

"It ain't my business, kid," he said. "But yore uncle said to jail yuh and charge yuh with theft, and I've got to do it. I reckon straightenin' it out won't be much trouble."

"But I don't aim to spend tonight in no jail! Where's Sheriff Bill Condor?"

"Sheriff had to go up to Warhawk. Won't be back till tomorrer. And I don't see no way around yuh spendin' the night in jail. Folks are gettin' curious. So if yuh don't want everybody knowin' all about this yuh'd better come along quiet."

"But I tell yuh Uncle Adam gave me that money to deposit!"

"No business of mine. Comin'?"

Hugh looked along the street. Coldwater was beginning to stir with curiosity. Men were beginning to converge on them. Sullenly, Hugh Tait whirled and strode across the street, followed by the deputy. They went into the sheriff's office. . . .

THE Masked Rider and Blue Hawk left the camp shortly after dark. A yellow moon was in the sky, and as the mist had not yet started rising from the river there was ample light. They headed straight for the Star Cross Ranch.

The big, two-story Star Cross ranchhouse, and its surrounding sheds and corrals, lay at the head of a manmade lake which had been fashioned by the damming of a small, spring-fed creek. In the moonlight the water gleamed like shimmering golddust. Dark pines towered over the ranch buildings, throwing them in shadows. Sparse timber came up to within a hundred feet of the main house on one side.

Reaching the place, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk halted in the shadowy depths of this belt of timber. Dismounting, the Robin Hood rider handed the stallion's reins to Blue Hawk.

"Wait here," he instructed. "I don't expect any trouble, and I shouldn't be gone long."

The Yaqui said, "*Si*, Senor," in a low voice, and the black-garbed figure vanished silently into the shadows. He gained the edge of the timber and found himself against the poles of a corral at one side of the ranchhouse. He crouched there motionless, studying the scene before him.

Lamplight glowed in what he guessed to be the bunkhouse, fifty yards away. He could hear a low hum of voices, could see the red glows from cigarettes in the shadows bordering the bunkhouse doorway.

Light showed dimly through drawn shades in a front room of the ranchhouse. This, logically, would be a combination living room and office, occupied by Adam Tait.

Light also glowed in the twin windows of an upstairs room. These windows were unshaded, and open. And now, suddenly, the Masked Rider saw the slender figure of Starr Tait pass before these windows as she crossed the room.

As usual, the Masked Rider made his decision quickly. Adam Tait was an un-

known quantity. There was little reason, however, to think that he would be receptive to a visit from the legendary Masked Rider. The same applied to the Star Cross punchers. No doubt they, like many others over the West, had heard conflicting stories concerning the Robin Hood rider. Some of them at least would consider him a cold-blooded killer and outlaw, therefore fair game, and would act accordingly.

It would be impossible for him to enter through the front doorway, without being spotted by the punchers. Furthermore, he wanted to talk with Starr Tait or her brother, and if he had to run, or make a fight of it, that opportunity would be gone.

CHAPTER IX

Star Cross Mystery

SKIRTING the corral, the Masked Rider gained a cedar hedge, and stayed with it until he reached the wall of the house. A few more steps and he stood in the shadows underneath Starr Tait's window. He took a small pebble from the ground, tossed it upward and through one of the windows. He heard it tinkle against the floor.

The Masked Rider waited. He knew he was taking a chance. In her nervousness, the girl might give the alarm before realizing who was beneath her window. There was a moment of deep silence in the room above, then the sound of soft footsteps approaching the windows. Then her voice, almost a whisper, came to him.

"Who is it, and what do you want?"

"The Masked Rider. I'd like to talk to yuh."

"It would be dangerous here," she answered, without hesitation or fear. "There's an outside stairway at the back of the house. Go there, and I'll let you in."

He murmured, *"Bueno,"* and faded toward the rear of the big old house. He found the stairs, silently climbed them, and as he reached a platform at the top a door opened stealthily. He found himself in a shadowy corridor, farther along which light seeped dimly from a half-open door.

Starr touched his arm. "I'm glad you came," she whispered. "Come to my room. I've drawn the shades."

They went along the corridor and entered the lighted room, the girl closing the door behind them. It was, he saw at a glance, her bedroom. It held a faint, sweet perfume. Starr gestured toward a chair, but the Masked Rider shook his head.

She was lovelier than ever in the blue dressing robe she wore. But there were shadows in her eys, and dark circles beneath them, and she looked as if she had been crying.

"I'm glad you came," she said again, impulsively. "I was afraid you'd forgotten your promise, and it seems there's nobody else to help us!"

"Has something happened?" the masked man asked quickly.

"Yes! It's Hugh. He's in jail, and I'm terribly worried. I can't understand it."

"What's he charged with?" asked the masked man.

"Stealing some money out of Uncle Adam's safe."

"That ought to be easy fixed. Why don't yore uncle just go to town and tell the sheriff it's all a mistake?"

"Because he's the one who brought the charge," she said bitterly. "That's why I say I can't understand it. I just got back from Coldwater a little while ago. I talked to Hugh. It was Red Teak, the deputy, who arrested him. Bill—Sheriff Condor—is out of town and won't be back until tomorrow."

Speaking softly, but swiftly, the girl related to the Masked Rider the story that Hugh Tait had told her of his arrest, and the charge of theft that their uncle had brought against him. He listened without interruption, his eyes narrowed coldly behind the domino, his keen brain placing each scrap of information in its proper niche.

Here was a new turn of affairs, but one which came as no great surprise to him. Here was another piece fitted into the jigsaw puzzle of sinister evil and death that was gradually shaping up.

"Hugh swears Uncle Adam gave him the money—it was Uncle's money, not Star Cross—to deposit in the bank for him," Starr said. "I'm sure Hugh didn't lie about it."

"Why would yore uncle do a thing like that?" the Masked Rider asked slowly.

"I—don't know. I'm frightened. There are so many things I don't understand. When I asked Uncle Adam about it he flew into a rage. He said that Hugh was a no-good, thieving scamp, that it wasn't the first time he'd missed money from the safe. I thought he would strike me. I'm certain there's something wrong with his mind, and has been ever since he made that trip to Utah."

"What about this puncher, Slim Ordway, that yore uncle sent into town with word for Hugh's arrest."

"He's been with Star Cross several years and was always considered honest. I'm sure he was just carrying out orders."

"After yore uncle came back from Utah —did he fire the old hands and bring in a new bunch?"

"No," Starr told him. "The old hands have stayed on, in spite of the way Uncle Adam has treated them. Mostly on account of Hugh and me, I think. My uncle hired two or three others, but they didn't get along with the old hands and soon left. Why do you ask?"

THE Masked Rider shrugged. "Just curious. Any new development on the flume the lumber people want to build across Star Cross?"

"No. But I'm certain the lumber people are honest. It's simply to their advantage to have the flume, and they're willing to pay for it. I've talked with them several times."

"What about this Jess Drum and the others that tried to kill Hugh and you a couple of days ago?" the masked man asked.

"I don't know," she said helplessly. "I'm all mixed up. And the way poor Smoky Bean died! And now—Hugh! It doesn't make sense to me. Have you any idea what it's about?"

"I'm beginnin' to," the black-garbed man said grimly. "Just one more question. Do yuh know an hombre named Bill Jaguars who has a little ranch over on the edge of the hills?"

"I've seen him, and heard considerable about him," she said. "He's generally considered no-good. He used to travel with some kind of show, I've heard. Why do you ask?"

"Jaguars had an accident," the Masked Rider said, and offered no further explanation. "The main thing now is to get yore brother out of the trouble he's in."

"Do you think it's serious?"

"No use lyin'." The Masked Rider shook his head. "I do. But don't worry—I'll do somethin' about it. First, though, I want to palaver with yore uncle."

"The mood he's in—he's drinking, too, I think—he might cause trouble."

"I'll take the chance!" was the grim answer. "How can I get to him, without bein' seen by anybody else?"

"There's another stairway in the corridor outside that leads down into another hallway," Starr said slowly. "Uncle Adam's room is right at their base. I don't think his door is locked. But please—" She looked appealingly at the stalwart, dark-clad figure. "Like I said, I don't think Uncle Adam's mind is just right. I don't think he's really to blame for what he does. You won't harm him?"

The Masked Rider shook his head. "Not unless I have to. I leave the same way I came?"

"If you wish."

He touched his hat, opened the door, and walked out into the corridor, closing the door behind him. In the brief glimmer of light he had seen the stairhead. He felt his way toward it, found it, started slowly and silently to descend. At its base he could see the dimmest of glows from under a doorway.

He paused before the closed door. He heard low, brief sound inside the room—the squeak of a chair, the clink of glass against glass. Beyond that there was silence.

The Masked Rider put his hand on the doorknob, turned it, pushed gently. The door opened slowly, and the masked man stepped quickly through into the room, and quickly closed the door. The room was big, roughly but adequately furnished. At one side was a broad fireplace, and a mantel over which were the mounted heads of a huge elk and a grizzly bear.

A man sat in a swivel chair before a big scarred desk, half facing the door. The man was tall and thick, powerful-appearing despite his middle-age. His features were craggy, rather dark, with high cheekbones across one of which ran a two-inch scar. His graying hair was shaggy, uncombed, his deep-socketed eyes slightly slanting. He was in range garb, with gray

woolen shirt open at the throat.

On the desk before Adam Tait was a whisky bottle and half-filled glass. His face was flushed, his eyes slightly bloodshot. The man, the Masked Rider saw, was half drunk.

As the masked man entered, Tait turned his head slowly and looked at him. He showed no surprise, made no move beyond the swinging of his chair to face his visitor fully. But quick, wild anger was plain in his eyes.

"What yuh want here?" he asked harshly.

"Just a few friendly words with you," the Masked Rider said calmly.

"People usually knock before openin' my door. Get out!"

"In good time." The masked man still spoke softly, but his words were edged with steel. "And I'd advise yuh not to talk too loud, Tait. Yuh know who I am?"

"Of course I do! But it don't cut any ice with me. I've got no busines with a thievin' killer who hides his face behind a mask. I'm an honest rancher."

"And a fool!" The Masked Rider stepped forward until he stood five feet from Adam Tait. His hands were empty, but hovered near the twin black guns. "Tait, if yuh know the Masked Rider, yuh know why I am in White Bear Basin. It is because there's evil here to be stamped out. And I'm here tonight because I think you at least know somethin' about what is happenin'."

ADAM TAIT set the glass on the desk beside the bottle, his gaze never leaving the Masked Rider's face. In his eyes were cunning and sullen hostility.

"I don't know what yuh're talkin' about," he said carefully.

"Then I'll tell yuh. I'm talkin' about Smoky Bean's death. And the rustlin' and robberies that have taken place lately. And the attempted killin' of yore niece and nephew. And now, the jailin' of Hugh Tait. That's just part of it. Can yuh explain them things?"

"Why should I explain anything to you?" Tait said irascibly.

"Because if yuh don't yuh might wish yuh had!" the masked man said, his tone threatening. "The lid's fixin' to blow off, Tait, and somebody's goin' to get hurt. It might be you, if yuh don't start cleanin' up yore boots. The night Smoky Bean died, he was trailin' you. Yuh know that, I reckon?"

"Trailin' me?" The rancher looked puzzled. "I was just out ridin' for a breath of fresh air. Why should he trail me? I've heard about a few robberies, of course, and the Star Cross has lost some cattle, along with others. As to somebody tryin' to kill my niece and nephew, I hadn't heard about it. They've acted mighty strange toward me lately. They seem hostile, suspicious—they tell me nothing. Why would anybody want to kill 'em?"

"I'm lookin' for the answer," said the Masked Rider. "Why would yuh want to sell flume rights to the lumber company?"

"Why, because it would bring the Star Cross ten thousand dollars. The money would belong to Starr and Hugh, not to me. It would be for their benefit. And the lumber people will go on cuttin' timber anyhow, whether or not they get the flume. Don't it make sense to you, Masked Rider?"

The Masked Rider shrugged. "I hope

[*Turn page*]

Now She Shops "Cash and Carry"

Without Painful Backache

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. *(Adv.)*

yuh've got as good an answer to why yuh had Hugh jailed and charged with theft," he said.

Adam Tait slapped his hand savagely against the desk and fresh anger flared in his whisky-reddened eyes.

"Because the young pup is a thief!" he said harshly. "He rifled my safe and took two thousand dollars, because I'd refused to give him more money to gamble away. I despise a thief above all things. But me havin' Hugh jailed don't mean I aim to press the charges. I just want to teach him a lesson. Tomorrow, or the next day, I'll have him turned loose, the charges dismissed."

"Sounds fair enough. Only I happen to know yuh've lied about some other things, and yuh might be lyin' about that too. And I reckon there're some things worse than a thief. Snakes, for one thing!"

"Snakes?" Adam Tait's voice was hoarse, and his eyes glowed with a strange inward fire as he stared at the Masked Rider. "Now, I don't agree with yuh there. A snake won't hurt yuh unless yuh bother it first."

"If Smoky Bean could talk, yuh reckon he'd agree with that?"

"Cuss yuh, Masked Rider, why do yuh keep talkin' about them things?" the rancher snarled, with sudden fury.

Suddenly he grabbed up the whisky bottle and flung it savagely at the Masked Rider's head. Then he snatched open a desk drawer and rammed his hand into it.

CHAPTER X

Killer Trap

IT WAS with amazing speed that the Masked Rider moved. He ducked, and the bottle crashed against the wall behind him. Then he leaped forward, his left hand grasping Tait's shirt front, and spun the big rancher violently away from the desk.

Tait's fingers were already curled about the butt of the six-shooter in the drawer. He jerked the weapon from the drawer, snarling with rage as he turned his head to glare at his adversary. His whisky-tainted breath was hot on the masked man's face.

Then, before he could bring the gun up, the Masked Rider blasted his fist into the rancher's face. Tait grunted, his head snapping back. The Masked Rider hit him again, deliberately, himself angered by Tait's treachery. The gun clattered to the floor. The rancher's thick body grew limp, and he slid down to the floor, the man in black releasing his shirt front as he fell.

The Masked Rider stepped back, tense, listening. But apparently the brief flurry of sound had not carried to the punchers outside. The silence held unbroken.

The Robin Hood rider looked down at Adam Tait's unconscious figure with puzzlement and some regret. He had hoped to find out more from the rancher, but Tait's sudden savage flare of violence had put an end to his probing. The man was not badly hurt, but he would be unconscious for some time. But the Masked Rider had found out enough to convince him of one thing—Adam Tait knew far more than he had been willing to reveal.

Furthermore, the Masked Rider was fairly certain that Hugh was in deadly danger and that, if the young fellow were to be saved, there was little time to lose.

With a last glance at the man on the floor, the Masked Rider again opened the door and went out into the hallway. The front door of the ranchhouse was invitingly open but, ignoring it, he retraced his steps up the stairs. Obviously Starr had heard the noise below, for the door to her room was open and she stood in the lamplight.

"What happened?" she asked anxiously. "I heard a noise."

"Yore uncle started a little ruckus," the masked man said hurriedly. "I had to knock him out, but he's not bad hurt. If I was you I'd just let him stay there till he comes out of it. It'll give me a little time for what I have to do."

"What is that?"

"I'm headin' for town—to get Hugh out of jail."

Her breath caught in her throat.

"You think he is in danger?"

"I'm shore of it! But there's no time to explain now. Don't worry if yore brother don't show up here. He may have to take to the hills for a few days. And you—" He paused, a frown creasing his forehead as he looked at the girl. "I think yuh'll be safe enough here tonight. Have yuh got

some friends in town yuh could stay with a few days, until this is cleared up?"

"Yes!" Her eyes were wide, but held no panic. "Then I am in danger too, even here. I'll do as you suggest, Masked Rider, tomorrow."

"Bueno!"

He went quickly along the corridor, through the door that opened onto the outside stairs, descended quickly to the ground. Swiftly he reached the spot in the timber where Blue Hawk waited with the two horses. He leaped into saddle.

"Trouble, Senor?" the Yaqui queried.

"Nothin' serious," the Masked Rider said tautly. "But the trouble ahead might be."

"Where do we ride?"

"To Coldwater. Tonight, Hawk, we break open a jail!"

"It would not be the first, Senor, and probably will not be the last," the Yaqui said matter-of-factly. "Who is inside the jail?"

The Masked Rider spoke softly to the great stallion, and Midnight, as if sensing the urgency, leaped forward, followed closely by the wiry gray. They raced through the sparse timber, cut to the right, and gained the wagon trail that led to Coldwater.

Tersely, as they rode, the Masked Rider told Blue Hawk what he had discovered at the Star Cross.

"You think, then, that Hugh Tait is innocent, that he was framed, and put in jail for some special reason?" Blue Hawk asked.

"I'm afraid so. If it had been Sheriff Bill Condor that jailed him— But it wasn't. The sheriff is out of town and won't be back until tomorrer. Deputy Red Teak is in charge, and I don't trust him. I hope I'm wrong. Because, otherwise, we may be too late."

They raced on, sound from the drumming hoofs of their horses rolling like muted thunder through the night. The wind hammered them and screamed at them. The silvery moonlight showed their faces grim and implacable. Once they passed a couple of slow-moving riders, flashing by without pause, and heard the startled punchers yell out at them.

And then Coldwater lay before them. They rounded a curve in the trail and pounded into the town's main street. And then, from somewhere among the wooden structures ahead, the slashing roar of gunfire came to them. Lashing gun flame rent the night. . . .

IT WAS almost ten o'clock when Deputy Red Teak came along the corridor that led from the sheriff's office back to the jail cells, carrying a lamp in one hand and a tray with Hugh Tait's supper on it in the other. He placed the lamp and tray on a wide box, while he produced a ring of keys from a nail on the wall and unlocked Hugh's cell door.

Hugh watched him, not getting up from the bunk. His eyes were bitter and angry. Red brought the tray of food into the cell and placed it on a stool before Hugh.

"Hungry, kid?" he asked, smiling.

"Why should I be?" Hugh countered sarcastically. "It's been only ten hours since I ate."

"I been busy. Had to ride over to Mexican Water. Here's the grub now, though. Pitch in."

Instead of leaving, he leaned against the wall and watched as Hugh ate. Apparently there was something on his mind. He seemed anxious to show his friendliness. Hugh remained sullenly silent.

"I been thinkin' this over, kid," Red said finally. "Looks to me like yuh're gettin' kind of a raw deal."

"Does it? Took yuh a long time to see it!"

"At first, I figgered yuh might really have took that dinero. But that don't make sense. Smells kind of fishy to me."

The young fellow glanced quickly at Red, but remained silent.

"I'd shore hate to rot in jail for somethin' I didn't do," Red said slowly, as if talking to himself. "But mebbe that'd be better than takin' to the owlhoot."

"I don't crave to take to the owlhoot," Hugh declared with dark bitterness. "All I want is a ten minute talk with Uncle Adam. I'd get the straight of this, or know why!"

"What if it didn't pan out?" Red asked slyly.

Hugh Tait was certain he detected some hidden meaning in the red-haired deputy's talk. Red was leading up to something. Had he misjudged the deputy?

"I figger it'd pan out, all right," Hugh declared. "If it didn't, I'd be willin' to

come back to jail. I ain't afraid to stand trial for somethin' I didn't do."

"Sounds reasonable," Red murmured. "I got nothin' against yuh, kid. I hope it works out all right. Well, I think I'll meander down to Big Annie's place and eat my own supper."

He turned and strolled out. He slammed the cell door noisily. But Hugh, watching narrowly, saw that he didn't remove the key ring from the cell lock. Hugh said nothing, but watched as Red went back along the corridor, leaving the lamp on the box. He heard Red clump noisily out of the sheriff's office and along the plank walk.

Hugh pushed the tray aside. He sat there several moments, thinking. Red Teak's actions had been plain enough. He was giving Hugh his chance to straighten this out with his uncle, trusting him to return to his cell if it proved unsuccessful.

"Reckon I misjudged him," Hugh muttered. "Well, danged if I aim to stay here a minute longer'n I have to!"

He jammed his hat on his head, crossed the cell and thrust his hand through the bars. He unlocked the door without trouble. Leaving the lamp on the box, the keys in the lock, he went quickly along the corridor to the office up front. There he paused, listening, peering through the windows.

The town was quiet, dark for the most part. Light speared dimly from the doors and windows of a couple of saloons, and from Big Annie's eating place. The street was empty except for half a dozen horses at tie-bars. Hugh reckoned he would borrow one of those horses for an hour or so, trusting to his ability to straighten it out with the owner later.

HE SAW a six-shooter on the sheriff's desk. It was his own gun, and he thrust it into his holster. He slid out the door and stood on the sidewalk. Nobody was in sight. Stepping into the dust, to deaden the sound of his boots, he started toward a group of saddled horses before one of the saloons.

Suddenly he heard a low, scraping sound, across the street to his left. The sound came from a dark alley.

He heard a low voice, Red Teak's voice, say:

"There he goes! He's breakin' jail! Let him have it!"

Hugh Tait whirled, knowing with a dark and dismal certainty that he had been tricked, and drove his body forward. He heard the blasting roar of guns, the slashing snarl of lead past his head. Wicked red flame lit the street.

Hugh landed on his stomach, on the sidewalk, the impact driving the breath from his lungs. He rolled desperately, clawing with hands and toes in his frantic haste. He felt himself leave the boards, and the choking smell of dust was in his nostrils. He became still, flattening himself behind the plank walk's wholly inadequate shelter.

The guns were still roaring across the street—three of them, he thought—the thunderous sounds racketing savagely through the town. Lead slashed into the walk, showering him with splinters. He slid a hand downward and inched his own gun from its holster. But he didn't dare raise himself to fire.

Realizing his hopeless position, terror gripped him. Then blind, helpless anger came. Red Teak's friendliness, he now knew, had been faked. Red had deliberately baited him into leaving his cell, with the fixed intention of shooting him down and reporting he had been killed while trying to escape—and he had stupidly fallen for the trick.

Who the two men with Red were, he had not way of knowing. It didn't matter. Again with that bitter, dismal feeling in the pit of his stomach, he knew that he would never know, nor would he know why Red Teak wanted to kill him.

The gunfire had slackened.

"I saw him fall!" he heard a voice say. "I think we got him. Let's cross over!"

Hugh could hear the low scuff of boots in the dust. He raised his head slightly and peered over the boards. He saw three figures emerge from the deep shadows of the buildings across the street and come into the moonlight. The men had guns in their hands, and they advanced slowly toward him, grim, deadly purpose in their stiff-legged stride.

Desperation lifted inside Hugh Tait again. He dragged his gun upward, slid the barrel across the board walk. The three heard the sound, or caught the movement. They stopped, leaped apart, their own guns snaking up again.

There was a sudden wild clatter of hoofs as two horsemen swept like twin thunderbolts along the street. In the lead was a huge black stallion, topped by a rider wholly in black, his dark cape billowing out behind him. In his hands were long-barreled six-shooters. Slightly behind, and ridden by an Indian, was a wiry gray.

The attention of the three shifted, and a quick, startled shout lifted from Red Teak:

"The Masked Rider! Get back to cover!"

The three men whirled, lunged back the way they had come.

The Masked Rider's guns blasted. Red stumbled, cursing bitterly, flame streaking from his own gun. He caught his balance and reeled on after the others. The two who were unwounded gained the inky shadows of an alley, and from its black maw their guns started to pound and blaze.

CHAPTER XI

Cavern of Evil

RACING on along the street, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk ignored the lead that snarled about them. They swept past the alley, pouring a deadly hail of bullets into it, then whirled their mounts and drove back. Startled by the furious gun storm that had broken over Coldwater, men had poured from the saloons. Their shouted questions echoed along the street.

Red Teak had stopped on the plank walk, either angrily defiant or too badly wounded to follow the others. He swayed there, triggering his gun, his hawklike features a mask of fury in the gunpowder flashes.

The Masked Rider drove Midnight straight at the deputy, his guns blazing. Red staggered again, went down, lying with his feet on the walk and the upper portion of his body in the dust. Midnight surged past the inert figure, leaped over the walk and plunged into the dark alley.

But Red's two henchmen had obviously had enough of the fight. The thuds of their boots receded swiftly behind the row of buildings as they fled. The Masked Rider whirled Midnight back into the street.

He leaped to the ground and stooped over Red Teak. Red was stirring, mumbling something in a hoarse voice. The masked man stooped low, in an effort to catch the almost incoherent words.

"Dark—can't find—curtain—to get in. Got to hurry—"

Then Red fell back and lay still. The masked man ripped open Red's shirt, lit a match, shielding the blaze with his palm. As he had suspected would be the case, on Red Teak's chest was the symbol of the coiled snake!

He dropped the match, whirled, leaped into saddle. Blue Hawk was hovering nearby. Hugh Tait was coming swiftly toward them.

The men who had come from the saloons had so far kept their distance, uncertain as to what was happening. But now the voice of a man among them—probably one of Red's companions who had circled back to the front—shouted:

"It's the Masked Rider! He's broke Hugh Tait out of jail! Let's get him!"

"Red tricked me!" Hugh Tait said excitedly. "He made me think he—"

"No time for that now!" snapped the Masked Rider. "Let's get out of here. Here—up behind me!"

Without further urging, Hugh leaped behind the Masked Rider's saddle. The stallion sprang forward, followed by Blue Hawk's gray. Guns opened up behind them. But almost instantly they were out of range and racing along the moonlit westward trail. The Masked Rider expected no pursuit, and this proved correct.

Hugh explained how Red Teak had tricked him into leaving his cell, so he could be shot down in an attempted "escape."

"But why did he want to kill me?" Hugh asked, bewildered. "I never particular liked him, but I never had trouble with him. There must have been some reason, though."

"There was," the Masked Rider agreed grimly.

"Mebbe Uncle Adam could explain it. At least, he could explain why he had me jailed. There seems to be a connection between the two."

The man in black nodded again.

"Yore uncle could explain, but I doubt if he would. And I'd advise yuh not to see him right now. Can yuh get a hoss, and some supplies, at the Star Cross without bein' seen by anybody?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then do it. I'll take yuh close to the ranch. Yore sister will understand, so I wouldn't even try to see her. Ride into the hills and lay low for a few days."

Hugh Tait argued briefly, then agreed to the Masked Rider's suggestion. The masked man refused to explain what he knew, or suspected, nor would he be drawn out regarding his plans.

"White Bear Basin' is fixin' to bust wide open," he promised, not boastfully, but with grim confidence. "And a lot of snakes are goin' to be tromped in the stampede!"

Dropping Hugh Tait near the Star Cross, the Masked Rider rode on to the camp for some much needed rest. But he was up before the first light of dawn.

Again in the rôle of Wayne Morgan, he saddled the hammerhead roan and rode straight for the vicinity of Pipe-organ Canyon where he settled down, prepared for a long wait, if necessary.

HOURS had passed when, crouched in a dense lodgepole thicket on the side of one of the slopes just outside the entrance to the canyon, he finally tensed suddenly at the sound of hoofbeats. Carefully he pulled aside the branches, peering through the mist down into the swale that lay between the ridges.

It was after mid-morning now, and Morgan had been in his place of concealment since daylight, when he had ridden there to relieve Blue Hawk. The Yaqui had stood watch through the remainder of the night after they had returned from Coldwater. Not for an instant had the pass entering the canyon been without the eagle-eyed scrutiny of one of them.

Now it looked as if Morgan's shrewd tactics were about to pay off. For several horsemen were riding slowly along the swale toward the pass. At their head was the giant lumberjack, Jess Drum. The others were strangers to Morgan, but all were hard-eyed and gun-belted. Lashed behind Drum's saddle was what looked like the strongbox from a stagecoach.

The riders were talking, but above the constant and violent roar of the water tumbling through the pass Morgan could make out no words. They passed without even glancing in his direction, and put their horses single-file along the rock ledge bordering the river through the pass. They vanished like ghosts into the fog that swirled inside the pass.

Without hesitation, Wayne Morgan left his hiding place and clambered down the slope. This was what he had been waiting for, and now that it had come, sooner than he had dared hope, he had no intention of losing out. He had left the roan on the slope. Now he went forward afoot, into and through the foggy and thunder-filled pass.

Inside the canyon, his eyes probed for the riders. They had already vanished into the mist, but straight ahead he could hear the click of hoofs against rock. The horsemen were still riding slowly. Morgan went forward again, at a trot, careful to make no noise and keeping to cover as much as possible.

The wind, funneling through the pass, was a steady rush in his ears. It had begun to make weird, pagan music among the spires.

Morgan knew he was gaining on the slow-moving riders, for several times he glimpsed them as the mist shifted. Then they were gone, and a feeling of unreality came to him. He felt with renewed force the menace and evil of this place.

Suddenly he paused, crouching behind a boulder. The sound of hoofs before him had stopped, although now he could hear the low hum of voices. Guns in hand, he eased forward, to another and closer point of concealment. Then he saw the riders again.

They had dismounted, and were leading their horses through a large black opening in a rock wall! Morgan watched, mystified. It was incredible that, in two previous searches, he and Blue Hawk could have overlooked this broad tunnel entrance.

Morgan suddenly blinked his eyes. The black opening had suddenly vanished! In its place was what appeared to be a solid rock wall. It was as if his eyes had played him false, as if the tunnel entrance had never existed!

But Morgan knew that it had not been an hallucination. He left the boulder he had been crouching behind and went slow-

ly, warily, forward. He paused before the cliff, in the exact spot where the horses and men had vanished. He put out a hand to touch the wall, knowing before he touched it what he would find. The spot he touched gave softly under his hand.

He remembered Red Teak's words as he died: "Dark—can't find curtain—to get in." The message of those words, seemingly meaningless then, was now plain.

Stretched tightly over the broad entrance to the tunnel was a stout strip of canvas. The surface of this canvas had been painted with infinite cunning so that it merged with the face of the cliff itself. Only by close inspection, and at close proximity, could the deception be discovered. A man might pass within feet of the tunnel entrance without suspecting its existence.

Morgan had made a shrewd—and correct—guess at the significance of Red Teak's words. They were what had led him to stand guard at the canyon entrance in the hope that members of the gang would lead him to the cleverly hidden hideout.

HE LIFTED a corner of the canvas and slid through into the tunnel. Dim light struck at his eyes. He stood utterly motionless, guns in hand. And now he saw that he wasn't in a tunnel, but a big, damp cave. The light came from a lantern on a flat boulder. At one side of the cave were half a dozen horses—the cave was big enough for several times that many, and from the stable smell in Morgan's nostrils it was used solely for that purpose—their reins looped over upthrust slags of rock. The men were nowhere in sight.

At the back of the cave was a large tunnel that led off into the darkness. Morgan crossed to the entrance and peered along this tunnel. In the distance he could see a second dim glow of light. He could hear odd, tinkling sounds.

Morgan had no idea what lay before him. He knew he was taking a big gamble, with his life as the stake. But he had eagerly accepted such a gamble before, and he took this one now without the slightest hesitation. In his mind was the almost certain knowledge that here in this dark, dismal place lay the solution to the dread mystery of Pipe-organ Canyon.

He went slowly along the tunnel, and no stalking cougar could have moved with greater stealth or silence. Chill, musty currents of air swirled about him. The dim glow drew steadily in toward him. The tinkling sounds became louder.

Then he stood at the entrance of another, and even larger cavern. At one side of the entrance was a line of waist-high boulders. He crouched behind these, eyes raised just enough to peer over them and into the cavern.

Wayne Morgan seldom showed surprise at anything he saw. But never had his interest been sharper or more concentrated than now as he surveyed the amazing scene before him!

CHAPTER XII

The Boss' "Pet"

LANTERNS, bracketed to the cave wall, bathed the place in a flickering, translucent yellow light. It was an immense limestone cavern that towered above Wayne Morgan like the gleaming walls and dome of a great cathedral. Vast white pillars upheld the vaulted roof, and frostlike tapestries, glowing like iridescent fires, draped the walls. Overhead hung giant chandeliers of gleaming stalactites.

Scattered over the floor of the cave were various odds-and-ends. There was camping gear, saddles, blankets, U. S. mailbags, sacks stamped with the names of banks, and stagecoach strongboxes such as the one that had been lashed behind Jess Drum's saddle. Morgan had no doubt that those sacks and boxes contained the rich loot of many robberies.

The half a dozen men who had just entered the cave were pawing about among the loot. It was obvious to Morgan that they had just held up another stage and had brought the loot straight to this cleverly hidden cache. It was also evident that this was more of a cache than a permanent hideout.

The men were talking, and in the vaulted room their voices sounded like the bursting of tiny light globes, with crystal fragments of sound clattering in all directions.

"Enough stuff here to make us all rich," one of the raiders said. "Wonder when the boss aims to give us our split?"

"He'll take care of us," the giant Drum declared gruffly. "We've had no cause for complaint so far, have we?"

"Nope, we've had plenty of *dinero*. But with all this stuff just layin' here, what's to keep a man from takin' some of it?"

"That's a crazy question! The boss could tell if any of it was missin'. Then yuh know what'd happen!"

"Yeah—yeah, I know what'd happen." Unmistakable fear had crept into the outlaw's voice. "I didn't have any ideas along that line. I'm just a little nervous, is all. What if somebody found this place?"

"Nobody'll find it. The boss is too smart for any John Law that ever lived.

Morgan was aware of a peculiar, indefinable odor in the cavern. He seemed to feel a malignant, unseen presence, and it gave him a sense of revulsion.

"And what about the Masked Rider? He's dangerous. He's already killed Jaguars and Red Teak, and he's been prowlin' here in Pipe-organ Canyon."

Jess Drum laughed. "Don't worry about the Masked Rider. The boss is onto him, and his number's about up. In fact, the boss told me the Masked Rider would be dead before another sun rises! That satisfy yuh?"

"Yeah. But how does he aim to do the job?"

"How does he usually get rid of the hombres that cross him?"

The nervous raider, a squat, bearded man, shivered.

"The boss gives me the creeps sometimes—him and that cussed pet of his! Just look at the devil over there. Two hundred pounds of hate and death and perdition!"

The men turned their heads and looked toward a spot at one side of the cavern. Morgan's eyes followed their gaze. His eyes had become more accustomed to the flickering light, and now he saw something there that he had not noticed before.

Suddenly the hair rose on the back of his neck and he felt as if an icy wind had washed over him. Suddenly he knew what that nauseous odor was, why he had sensed a malignant presence.

Against the cavern wall was an iron-barred cage. And inside the cage something moved—a sinuous, serpentine shape that radiated hate and evil and malignancy. From the thing emanated a dim, phosphorescent glow.

Wayne Morgan's shrewd, realistic mind had that first night guessed at the shocking truth. Still, the full knowledge of what was inside that cage was like a physical blow.

Imprisoned in the cage was a huge snake! He couldn't see plainly enough to accurately gauge its size, but it obviously was well over twenty feet in length and thicker than the calf of a large man's leg. Quite as obviously, the reptile had been covered with phosphorous or a luminous paint, which accounted for the weird glow. The glow would be even more pronounced in pitch darkness than here in the lantern light.

This, then, was what had crushed Smoky Bean. It was the serpentine thing that Blue Hawk had seen wriggle into the brush, and which Morgan and the Yaqui had trailed into Pipe-organ Canyon. This was the boss' "pet", his method of getting rid of the men who crossed him, the fate he had reserved for the Masked Rider!

MORGAN shivered despite himself. What manner of man, or devil, must this boss be? A man who made a pet of a monstrous snake, using it as a symbol for membership in his outlaw crew, holding it as a threat to keep them in line. Who was "the boss?"

"—got somethin' big planned for tonight," Jess Drum was saying. "I don't know what it is, but he said he'd guarantee us some good entertainment. Mebbe he's got the Masked Rider and aims to have him here, I dunno. And mebbe he's gettin' impatient and aims to make a quick clean-up in the valley and get out. Anyhow, he wants the whole bunch to be here by midnight. Me, I don't aim to miss it."

Wayne Morgan wriggled backward into the tunnel. He had seen and heard enough. He went back along the tunnel, feeling a distinct relief as the distance increased between himself and that cave of evil. He went through the cave that held the horses, lifted a corner of the painted canvas and stepped out into mist-filled Pipe-organ Canyon.

Drawing the cool, clean air into his lungs, he started walking swiftly toward

the pass. The wind made weird music among the cliffs and spires, and that chill feeling of malignancy near was still inside him.

He was leaving Pipe-organ Canyon. But he would be back. . . .

Three hours later, Wayne Morgan sat with Sheriff Bill Condor in the blond young lawman's office in Coldwater. He was giving a complete account of all that had been seen and heard in Pipe-organ Canyon—but it was a second-hand report.

"And that's the story," he finished quietly. "Like I told yuh, the Masked Rider asked me to bring yuh the word. For reasons yuh'll understand—he couldn't be seen in town in daylight."

Sheriff Condor's face was a little pale beneath his tan, and showed plainly the deep worry of the last few days. But his eyes were grim, determined, though now slightly wary.

"Yuh're shore the Masked Rider saw this place, and what was in it?" he asked. "Yuh're shore he wasn't mistaken, or—"

"Or lyin'?" Morgan shook his head. "The Masked Rider don't lie, and unless he's shore he's right he keeps his mouth shut! I've heard plenty about him."

The sheriff flushed. "I've just got to be shore myself. Things have gone plumb loco lately. And it was the Masked Rider that killed my deputy, Red Teak."

"I've explained that, all I know about it, just as the Masked Rider told me," said Morgan. "Teak was a member of the outlaw bunch. He had the sign of the coiled snake on his chest. Is that hard for yuh to believe?"

"No—no, it ain't! While Red was raised here in the basin, he's wandered a lot the last few years. I never did like or trust him. I made him deputy because some pressure was brought to bear and it was hard to get anybody else lately. All right, Morgan, I'm takin' yuh at yore word. Lord knows, what yuh've just told me is hard to believe! But so are some of the things that have happened the last few months. Did the Masked Rider have any idea who the boss of this killer crew is?"

"If he did he kept it quiet. But this boss will be at the hideout tonight along with the others, accordin' to the Masked Rider."

"What was the Masked Rider's suggestion?"

"That you round up a big posse and raid the hideout," Morgan said promptly. "They likely won't be expectin' trouble, and yuh ought to be able to hem 'em underground like rats in a trap."

"My idea exactly! Ought to be able to grab the whole skunky crew, or wipe 'em out, I don't care which. I'll start swearin' in my possemen pronto."

"Be powerful shore of yore men," Morgan cautioned. "Remember, nobody knows just who does belong to the bunch. One little leak and the whole scheme is smashed."

"I'll be double careful," assured the sheriff. "There're plenty honest men in the basin, men I can be absolutely shore of, men who have taken losses at the hands of the raiders or couldn't be shore they wasn't next on the list. I can round up fifty men, easy, who'll jump at the chance to wipe out that scum!"

"*Bueno!* Another thing. The owlhoots won't gather until midnight. Yuh want to be certain all the rats are in the trap—especially the boss."

"Will you be ridin' with the posse, Morgan?" asked Condor.

WAYNE MORGAN shook his head, and shrugged.

"No—I'm liable to be plumb out of White Bear by midnight," the tall rider declared. "But the Masked Rider'll be along. He said to tell yuh he'd go on ahead, to make certain everything is set for the attack. He'll leave his trailmate, a Yaqui named Blue Hawk, at the entrance to Pipe-organ Canyon to guide yuh to the hidden entrance to the cave."

"Where'll the Masked Rider be?"

Morgan shrugged broad shoulders. "Mebbe at the cave entrance, mebbe inside the cave. Wherever he's needed most, I figger."

"He's got the right idea, at that," Sheriff Condor said admiringly. "His scheme looks fool-proof. I don't know what I'd have done without his help, how many more men might have died."

"Others might die yet," Morgan said grimly.

"Any man who rides with me tonight will be willin' to take that chance, if it means wipin' out that devilish snake-sign bunch," the sheriff declared soberly. "Now, let's go over this ag'in, just to make shore. . . ."

A little later, as Morgan was preparing to leave, there was a sudden clatter of hoofs along the street as a rider mounted on a sweat-lathered horse galloped into town. The rider, they saw instantly, was Adam Tait. The rancher jerked his mount to a halt before the sheriff's office, jumped heavily to the ground and stumbled inside.

Tait was bareheaded, his gray hair splayed about his eyes, his sweat-streaked face gray and strained. He was breathing heavily as he leaned against the sheriff's desk.

"What is it, Adam?" Bill Condor asked sharply. "What's wrong?"

"It's my niece, Starr!" Adam Tait gasped. "I'm afraid somethin' has happened to her!"

CHAPTER XIII

Pit of Shadows

JUMPING to his feet, the sheriff grasped the rancher's shoulder and shook him roughly.

"What do yuh mean?" he demanded. "Speak out, man!"

"Starr left the ranch two or three hours ago, sayin' she was ridin' into town." Adam Tait spoke slowly, laboriously. "I thought nothin' of it. A little while ago her pony came back to the ranch, riderless. I thought mebbe she'd been thrown on the trail, mebbe hurt, and so started out to look for her.

"On the ground close to the Foxtail Creek crossin', I found her hat, but there was no sign of her. The hat's in my saddle-bag. That led me to believe somethin' awful had happened to her, so I came on to town as fast as I could."

Bill Condor swore bitterly. His face had paled and his lean jaw muscles were twitching. Morgan, watching the rancher, saw that he had partly regained his composure. But his agitation seemed real enough.

"What's to be done?" Tait demanded. "I—I know me and my niece and nephew haven't got along any too well lately. But I think the world of Starr. I'd hate myself if somethin' happened to her. Sheriff, find her and I'll give yuh—"

"Yuh don't have to give me anything!" Condor said savagely. "And if them snaky varmints have harmed her I'll make 'em wish they'd never been born!"

"Yuh've got some idea who might be behind it?"

"Yes, I have. Morgan here just brought word—"

"That I run across the Masked Rider this mornin'," Morgan cut in hastily.

"What?" Condor said, puzzled. "Yuh told me the Masked Rider had—"

"I told yuh he must be behind the things that've been happenin' here!" Morgan looked flatly, warningly, at the sheriff. "The tales I've heard about him I wouldn't be surprised at anything."

"Yeah, mebbe yuh're right," the sheriff muttered. He said to Adam Tait. "Like Morgan says, I reckon the Masked Rider's at the bottom of this. We were just talkin' about a plan we have to trap him."

"That's fine," Adam Tait declared. "I know I can depend on yuh, Sheriff. Call on me for anything yuh need. I think I'll go over to the Special and get me a drink now. I need it!"

Tait went out and strode heavily across the street.

"Now, Morgan," the sheriff said, frowning, "what did yuh mean by that? Why did yuh stop me?"

"Because that might have been one of the leaks we were just talkin' about," Wayne Morgan said bluntly. "Because the man who just left here is not Adam Tait!"

"Not— What in Tophet yuh talkin' about?"

"He's an imposter, a fake."

"That's hard to swallow, Morgan. If he's not Adam Tait, who is he?"

"I don't know," Morgan said truthfully. "But I'm almost shore he's not the real Adam Tait. That's somethin' else the Masked Rider told me, and I'm takin' his word for it. I'm thinkin' yuh'll find out who he is—and a good many other things—tonight."

Condor's face was harried, desperate. "But what about Starr? Mebbe yuh didn't know it, Morgan, but me and Starr aim to be married next month. I've got to find her! Yuh think them killers has her?"

Morgan nodded, unruffled. "But I don't think any harm has come to her, and won't until after the outlaws meet at midnight in Pipe-organ Canyon. Then— But long be-

fore then the Masked Rider will know what has happened. I think I can promise yuh, Sheriff, that Starr Tait won't be hurt so long as the Masked Rider lives!"

BLUE HAWK gained the base of the canyon wall thirty feet from the spot where a guard sat on a flat-topped boulder with a rifle across his knee. The Yaqui began an inch-by-inch advance along the wall, moving slowly, and with animal stealth. Between his teeth was a long-bladed knife.

In Pipe-organ Canyon the mist had risen from the river and the moonlight, trying to break its way through the shroudlike pall, bathed the canyon in that characteristic weird golden light. The walls and spires were like dripping black monsters in the shifting fog.

Blue Hawk continued his cougarlike advance through the deep shadows at the base of the wall. Now he was thirty feet from the motionless guard, now twenty. Somewhere off in the mist there was a slight sound, and the guard tensed, peering in that direction. The Yaqui froze motionless.

The guard muttered something, moved restlessly. Blue Hawk wriggled forward. When he was ten feet from the guard, he slowly got to his feet. The guard had rolled a cigarette and was fumbling in his pocket for a match.

When the match flared, Blue Hawk leaped. The guard warned, somehow, wheeled away, trying to bring his rifle into play. The Yaqui's slashing knife missed. The guard squawked a curse, tried to leap backward, but his boot heel caught on a trailing vine and he sprawled on the ground.

Blue Hawk pounced on him relentlessly then. His arm rose and fell. This time he didn't miss. The guard twitched and lay still. The Yaqui got slowly to his feet.

"All is well, Senor," he called softly.

The black-garbed Masked Rider rose from behind a boulder and came forward, in his hand the gun with which he had been covering Blue Hawk. He stood with his ear close to the painted canvas. Inside the cave he heard the stamping of horses, nothing else.

"Go back to the pass and stay there till the posse comes," he instructed Blue Hawk tersely. "Then guide 'em here. They can attack right away, for I'm certain all the outlaws are inside now."

"And you, Senor?" the Yaqui asked anxiously.

"I'm goin' into the cave. If Starr Tait is there, she may be in danger. The posse might get here too late to help her."

"Be careful, Senor," warned Blue Hawk. "Terrible evil and danger for yourself are also inside."

The Masked Rider nodded, watched as his Indian companion vanished quickly into the fog. Then without hesitation he lifted a corner of the canvas and moved into the cave.

The cave was as it had been before, except that now it held probably twenty horses. The Robin Hood rider crossed silently to the mouth of the tunnel that led back into the walls. In the distance he could see the dim glow of light that marked the inner cave.

He went along the tunnel, feeling the musty currents of air swirl about him, knowing the deadly peril of what lay ahead. It still lacked perhaps half an hour of midnight, when the posse would strike. But impatience, and knowledge of what might be happening in the subterranean hideout, had goaded him to immediate action. It had been necessary to get rid of the lookout before the posse's arrival, anyway, but entering the tunnel had been a sudden decision.

The flickering glow drew closer. And then the Masked Rider crouched behind the line of boulders at one side of the cave entrance. He was prepared for anything, even the fantastic scene that met his eyes.

The bracketed wall lamps flickered and guttered. A score of gun-belted, hard-faced men stood or sat in a semi-circle at one side of the vaulted cavern. These men were silent, with conflicting emotions mirrored on their faces. Awe, revulsion, eager anticipation, even a vacuumlike blankness were depicted.

Among them was the man known as Adam Tait. And Jess Drum. And on the cave floor, several yards from these men, her back against the wall, was Starr Tait. Her ankles and wrists were bound with rawhide thongs. Her face was deathly pale, her eyes wide, horror-stricken, as she stared straight before her.

A quick glance had shown the Masked

Rider these things. Now his gaze riveted on the figure standing almost in the center of the cave, as if upon a stage.

The man was bareheaded, nude from the waist up. His muscular body gleamed in the eerie light cast by the lanterns. He was smiling. From him radiated a faint, bluish glow, like the iridescent glow emanating from the gleaming cavern walls.

The man was Jeffrey Blalock.

Coiled about the upper portion of Blalock's body was the giant blue snake. The Masked Rider saw now that it was a huge python. The reptile's powerful coils were looped loosely about Blalock's body, its wedge-shaped head resting on his shoulder, its evil eyes unblinking. The artist's powerful legs were braced under its weight.

REVULSION surged over the black-garbed rider. Blalock's hands were caressing the snake's scaly coils. His voice was a crooning murmur as he talked to it, and the reptile's coils moved almost imperceptibly as if in ecstasy. The monster seemed to be wholly within Blalock's power!

Again revulsion swept like a dark tide through the Masked Rider, followed by flaming anger. For now he had a fuller understanding of some of the things that had happened. Blalock was the python's master—he could make the huge reptile do his bidding.

To discover that Blalock was leader of the killer bunch was not in itself surprising, since the Masked Rider had already guessed the truth. He had suspected Blalock even before discovering the cleverly painted curtain hiding the tunnel entrance.

The curtain had served to make the artist's guilt a certainty in his mind. Blalock's seeming contempt for riches, his hatred for violence and evil, his fierce love for peace and beauty—these things, falsely assumed, had fashioned the garb behind which he hid his true nature.

For now there was nothing of meekness or serenity or goodness about Blalock. His smile was a wicked grimace. His features were distorted with the viciousness that was inside him. His glittering eyes mirrored the hate and cruelty and triumph he felt. Blalock's purring voice jarred the Masked Rider.

"So you see, Miss Tait, what will happen if you do not do what I ask."

The girl's voice was low, unsteady. "What it is you want?"

"I merely want to know where your brother is hiding."

"I don't know that, and I wouldn't tell you if I did. Why did you bring me here, and why do you want my brother?"

"That will be explained after you tell me what I want to know."

"I'll never do it!" Starr cried defiantly. "I suppose you want Hugh and me to sign the papers that would give the lumber syndicate flume rights across Star Cross?"

Blalock shrugged. "That, my dear, is unimportant now. It will be attended to in the near future without the services of you and your brother—by your uncle."

"That man is not my uncle!" the girl said sharply, without taking her gaze from Blalock and the python. "I know that now, and I was a fool not to see it sooner!"

"Quite true, he is not your uncle," Blalock calmly agreed. "There is no point in denying that now. The deception is my own handiwork and I am rather proud of it. And that fact does not change matters in the least. The masquerade has not been suspected by the stupid fools in this valley, and will not be until after I have accomplished my purpose."

"What is that purpose?"

"To strip this valley, to pick it as clean as buzzards pick the bones of a dead beast!" Blalock said coldly. "To strip it of everything of value that can be stolen —cattle, money, everything. But to do that will require several years, and for safety's sake I need the Star Cross Ranch as a base of operations. That will come about through your 'uncle'.

"Later, of course, when we are ready to seek greener pastures, the Star Cross will be stripped to the last head of cattle, and sold. The ten thousand dollars for the flume is only a small portion of what we will gain. But I digress. Will you tell me where your brother is?"

"What if I refuse?"

Blalock was smiling, caressing the python's scaly coils. The snake raised its head slightly, weaving it to and fro.

"This creature is my pet, Miss Tait. With slight persuasion, I can make it do whatever I wish. You will observe, on the

rock shelf yonder, a bottle containing a brownish liquid?"

As if hypnotized, the girl turned her head and looked where Blalock pointed. Four feet above the cave floor was a rock ledge, and on the ledge the Masked Rider could see, among other things, what appeared to be a quart bottle.

"The liquid in that bottle has a vile odor that is very revolting to humans—but not to a snake, I assure you," purred Blalock. "It is a powerful lure, and can be smelled by this beauty for a considerable distance. It will instantly attack anything or anybody that has been sprayed with this lure, and if it is alive, crush it.

"That is how the inquisitive and foolish cowboy, Smoky Bean, died. The python was taken outside the canyon, and then the cowboy was lured underneath a tree where I was concealed among the branches. A small amount of the lure sprinkled on the puncher's clothes—and my pet did the rest!"

"You—you fiend!" the girl gasped.

Blalock bowed mockingly. "I have been called many things, and have been many things—adventurer, painter, and zoologist, to mention a few. It was in Africe that I found this lovely creature, and from a savage native tribe that I learned the secret of the potion that controls it. I have kept it with me for years, whereever I go. I brought it here from Utah. I have found it to be a good friend, and most useful on occasions."

On the walls of the cavern the burning torches threw grotesquely weird shadows that danced a pagan jig in gleeful anticipation of the horror that would soon be unshrouded in this ancient place.

CHAPTER XIV

The Trap

GENTLY Jeffrey Blalock unwound the snake coils from about his body and lowered the python to the cave floor. It lay there still—an enormous thing, deadly, evil incarnate—at its master's feet. Some of the outlaws inched backward nervously. Others remained motionless, a peculiar, wicked anticipation on their faces. The guttering lanterns cast a weird, unearthly glow over the cavern, giving it the aspect of a scene from another world.

The Masked Rider's attention was riveted wholly on the incredible drama being enacted before him. He was unaware that his powerful body was as tense as steel, that his instinctive hatred for iniquity had kindled a raging fire inside him. For here was viciousness in its worst manifestation, naked and raw.

"Jess," Blalock said abruptly, "untie the lady."

The big lumberjack, Jess Drum, shuffled forward. He drew a knife and cut the thongs that bound Starr Tait. She remained seated, eyes wide and terror-filled, as if incapable of movement.

"Now bring me the bottle!" Blalock said then.

Drum took the bottle from the rock ledge, brought it and placed it in Blalock's hand. Blalock didn't uncork the bottle. The python stirred slightly, as if in anticipation.

"Miss Tait," Blalock's voice was velvety

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soft, but as deadly as a snake's hiss, "because you are a beautiful girl, and I a man who worships at the shrine of beauty, I have shown you every consideration. But now my patience is at an end. You have one last opportunity to answer my question."

"I've told you I don't know where my brother is!" Starr Tait cried bitterly. "Why should I tell you if I did? You intend to kill me anyway. You would never let me go after what I've seen and heard!"

"That is true. But"—the bandit leader glanced significantly down at the great python—"some ways of dying are easier than others. A few drops of this potion sprinkled on you and my pet will wrap his coils round and round your lovely body, and slowly they will tighten until—"

The girl hid her face, and the Masked Rider could hear her racking sobs.

"After all," Blalock went on, with relentless cruelty, "it isn't so important whether you talk. In time your brother will be found and killed. With both of you dead the ranch becomes your 'uncle's', and I gain my point anyway. From behind Adam Tait's respectability I will reach out over the basin and drain it dry. I am only trying to save time and trouble for myself, and make things easier for you."

"No!" the girl said wildly. "Do your worst—I wouldn't do anything to help a monster like you if I could!"

With a sudden snarl of rage, Blalock stepped toward her.

The Masked Rider braced his powerful legs. Wayne Morgan had said to Sheriff Bill Condor, "I can promise you that Starr Tait won't be hurt so long as the Masked Rider is alive."

Blalock was not bluffing, and there was no mercy in him. Starr Tait was about to die. The Masked Rider rose suddenly to his feet, hands reaching for the black guns. At the same instant a low, scraping sound behind him warned him of danger from another quarter.

He whirled away, trying desperately to complete his draw. He glimpsed a shadowy figure hovering over him, a hand holding a clubbed gun slashing downward at his head.

Bitter self-blame at his carelessness in letting one of the killers enter from the canyon and sneak up behind him, lifted inside the Masked Rider. Despite his wild lurch to one side, the gun-barrel connected solidly with his skull. The cavern seemed to explode in a crazy zooming of stars and pinwheels.

He knew he was on the ground. He was not entirely unconcious, but he couldn't move. His whole body felt numb. Although he could see nothing, he could hear the thud of boots, and a low babble of voices that seemed a vast distance away. Desperately he tried to reach for his guns, but paralytic bonds held him helpless.

He thought of the girl. Had his capture, as he was about to go to her rescue, postponed her fate, or was she even now being slowly crushed within the powerful coils of the huge python?

Then the fog deepened in the Robin Hood rider's brain, and he seemed to be floating endlessly on a dark and stormy sea. He seemed to hear the thunderous roar and crash of vast waves that threatened to engulf him, and to see the wild flare of red lightning over the dark water.

VAGUELY he knew that he was not really hearing or seeing these things, that he was struggling in the smothering clutches of semi-consciousness. With the fierce savagery of bitter physical combat, he fought to rise out of the pit of shadows. And slowly he won the fight.

He was first conscious of the loud, excited voices about him. He heard Starr Tait scream. Then the lights grew brighter and brighter. His head ached, and a great weight seemed to be pressing against his body. A vile, penetrating odor was in his nostrils.

Now he could see the gleaming walls of the cavern, and the faces of the outlaws ringing him, and he knew that he lay on the floor of the cavern in the center of it. The weight was still on his body, the nauseous odor in his nostrils.

Suddenly the Masked Rider's blood seemed to turn to ice. He was, he realized with numbing certainty, in the coils of the giant blue serpent!

The Masked Rider had faced death in many forms. Fear was unknown to him. And yet knowledge of his plight now sent a shock through him and made cold sweat break out on his face.

He guessed that while he lay half-conscious Blalock had sprinkled some of

the vile-smelling snake lure over him, and the python had attacked. As yet the huge reptile had only one coil looped about his body, and that only lightly. The snake's ugly head lay on his chest, its unblinking muddy eyes no more than a foot from his own.

The masked man seized the python just behind its head, and twisted. He flexed his powerful muscles, and rolled, trying to break away from the coil that held him. But the movement served only to startle the reptile. A tremor ran through the scaly body, and the coil tightened.

The Masked Rider grew still again, his mind coldly calculating. On the cave floor ten feet away lay his twin belts and guns. They were hopelessly beyond his reach. The outlaws stood in a half-ring about him and the python, watching the weird battle, a blank fascination on their faces and in their eyes.

Starr Tait cowered against the rock wall, staring wide-eyed at him, her face white and drawn with terror. Jeffrey Blalock stood apart from the others. He was smiling, and the smile gave to his face a cast that was wholly satanic. There was a jeering quality to his voice when he spoke.

"I have heard that you are a brilliant man, Masked Rider, that nobody outwits you. I have heard that you can escape from any trap, any predicament. Can you think of a way out of this one?"

Several of the outlaws guffawed. The Masked Rider's cold eyes met Blalock's levelly, fearlessly, contempt in their icy depths. The deadly fury in those eyes wiped the mocking smile from the outlaw leader's lips. His captors had not bothered to remove the Robin Hood rider's cape and mask, doubtless reserving that task until after he was dead.

"I didn't underrate your cunning," Blalock went on, frowning. "I knew that you suspected me, that you might have discovered this place and be so foolhardy to come here tonight. That is why I concealed one of my men in a cavity out in the tunnel. Did you come alone?"

Still the Masked Rider remained silent. He retained his grim hold on the snake's body just behind the head. He could feel the coil slowly tightening, and already the pressure on his ribs was extremely painful. Desperately his keen mind probed for some way out of his perilous predicament. But there seemed to be none.

He knew that, weaponless, despite his great strength, he was almost helpless in the slowly constricting coils of the python. The coils might crush him quickly, or slowly, depending on his own actions, but seemingly there could be only one final result. With a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach, he remembered Smoky Bean.

Blalock was saying something, the masked man didn't know what. The outlaws had begun to jeer and shout, impatient for action. The Masked Rider knew that he could expect not the slightest mercy from any of these men. He was utterly alone, and whether he lived or died depended entirely on himself.

Again his gaze strayed to the twin guns on the cave floor. Again he tensed his powerful muscles. He placed one hand on the cave floor, he bent his legs at the knees, bracing his feet. And then, suddenly and savagely, he heaved upward.

THE powerful lunge brought him to his knees, to his feet. The python's body flailed wildly. With lightning speed, it whipped another coil about the masked man's body, and then a third, lifting its entire length from the cave floor.

The Masked Rider was amazed at the reptile's weight. He staggered, braced himself, swayed. A low groan was wrenched from him as the coils tightened convulsively.

The watching outlaws yelled and jeered, their wolfish natures inflamed by the bizarre spectacle. The girl screamed again and again.

Rage rushed like a black torrent through the masked man. With a mighty effort he lunged toward the guns on the floor. But the python's flailing tail got between his feet and tripped him and he plunged heavily to the floor, several feet short of the guns.

He tried to roll, straining with all his might, beating with his fist at the snake's huge head, determined to fight until the last breath left his body. The cave was in an uproar. Probably the watchers had seen men die in those deadly bluish coils before tonight. Probably they had seen the victims die screaming, but without resistance, frozen motionless by terror and the certainty of their fate.

But never had they seen such a savage, merciless battle as this between the python and the stalwart man in black—a man who fought silently, furiously, cunningly, as if without thought of defeat. The dimly lit cavern might have been a primeval pit, the battlers two creatures of the Dark Ages.

Inside the Masked Rider was the dismal certainty that he was no match for the giant snake. The coils were slowly but relentlessly constricting about his body. He could breathe only with great difficulty. Almost unbearable pain slashed at his body. But not for an instant did he stop fighting.

He didn't see the man who ran in from the tunnel. The man was staggering, and there was blood on his face.

"Grab yore guns, yuh fools!" he gasped. "There's a big posse outside and they've got us hemmed. They nearly got me!"

At first, wholly engrossed in the weird battle, the outlaws paid only slight attention to him. But the wounded man ran among them, shoving, striking with his fists, yelling at them frantically. Gradually the significance of his words penetrated their fogged brains.

Blalock cursed, and snatched a gun from one of his henchmen.

"Into the tunnel!" he snapped. "Maybe we can fight our way through if it's not too late. It's our only chance."

The outlaws streamed into the tunnel, desperation stamped on their faces. The Masked Rider and the python were momentarily forgotten in the face of this new peril. Only the terrified girl remained, cowering against the cave wall.

Despite her terror, Starr seized a small piece of rock, darted forward and started beating frantically at the writhing coils that were slowly squeezing the life from the black-clad man. The blows bounced harmlessly off the armorlike scales.

Only then was the Masked Rider aware that the outlaws had deserted the cave. Dimly he heard the roar of gunshots, and knew that at last Blue Hawk had led the sheriff's posse to the tunnel entrance. But he realized also that almost certainly their arrival meant no help for him.

The killer gang, barricaded in the tunnel, might hold off the posse for hours. And his life-or-death battle with the blue python would end, one way or the other, within minutes.

"My—guns—there on—floor!" he gasped at the girl.

It took a moment for Starr to grasp his meaning. She seemed dazed, incapable of coherent thought. When she finally understood, she ran to the gun-belts, snatched one of the black guns from its holster and darted with it toward the Masked Rider.

But at that instant the python started flailing wildly. Its lashing tail struck the girl, hurled her backward to the cave floor. The gun clattered from her hand. She lay there, half-stunned, sobbing weakly.

And the Masked Rider knew that he could expect no further help from her!

CHAPTER XV

Death Underground

DESPERATELY the Masked Rider renewed the battle, dimly aware that the distant firing was going on and on. A fog was gathering in his brain. He marshaled his magnificent strength for one final furious effort.

He rolled his body forward, gained his knees. Then, straining every muscle, gasping for breath, he fought to his feet. He stood there a moment, swaying, struggling savagely to stand upright under the python's weight and its wild flailing. Then, inch by inch, he started working himself toward the gun that the girl had dropped on the floor.

As if sensing his intentions, the python's coils constricted sharply. The masked man clenched his teeth against the involuntary moan of pain that was wrenched from him. The cavern reeled before his eyes. He stumbled, regained his balance, never pausing in his slow, implacable advance toward the gun.

Where a lesser man would have gone down, given up against the intolerable odds, he fought on—and never had he fought a battle against human adversaries so filled with such bitterness and fury. Each second was interminable; each foot he gained seemed a mile. The cavern zoomed and whirled redly before his eyes and a surf-like roar droned in his ears.

Now the gun was six feet away—now five. . . .

Wildly, knowing it would be his last effort, he flung himself forward, falling full length. His outflung hand missed the gun, groped desperately, found it, and with a thrill of thanksgiving his fingers curled about the gun's black handle.

The gun seemed incredibly heavy. Slowly, and with great effort, the Masked Rider raised it. He placed the muzzle an inch from one of the python's eyes, and pulled the trigger. The huge reptile jerked convulsively, its tail lashing the floor. Again, and again, the Masked Rider triggered the black gun, its bellowing roars beating back from the cavern walls. The python's head seemed to explode and almost vanish.

The giant snake writhed. The coils loosened their death hold, fell away from the Masked Rider's body, and the monster lashed out its life against the rocky cave floor.

The masked man reeled to his feet, drawing in great lungsful of air. Pain flowed like a hot stream through his body, but he was reasonably certain that no bones were broken.

Suddenly a lithe figure leaped catlike through the tunnel entrance into the cave. Blue Hawk, by some miracle of stealth and courage, had entered the tunnel and made his way through the confused outlaws. In his hand he carried a rifle.

The Yaqui paused, his anxious, alert eyes slashing a glance about the cave. As he saw the Masked Rider, relief flooded over his coppery face.

"You are all right, Senor?"

"*Bueno,* Hawk!" panted the Masked Rider. "How are things outside?"

"The outlaws are trapped. I got here as quickly as I could, Senor. I led the posse to the entrance, and then—"

The Yaqui broke off. Boots were thudding in the tunnel, the sounds growing louder as they approached the cave.

The Masked Rider snatched up his belts and other gun from the floor. He seized Starr Tait, lifted her to her feet, carried her to the back of the cave and placed her behind an upthrust ledge of rock where she would be protected from flying lead.

"Over with her, Hawk!" he snapped at the Yaqui. "It'll serve as a barricade."

Blue Hawk quickly obeyed, crouching behind the rock ledge with rifle in hand. The Masked Rider stood just in front of the ledge, guns now holstered.

Four men burst into the cavern. At their head was Blalock, his eyes wildly ablaze with fury. Close behind him was the huge lumberjack Jess Drum. They had guns in their hands.

"All right, Blalock," the Masked Rider called flatly, implacably. "This is trail's end!"

The four outlaws rocked back on their heels. Blalock's furious eyes stabbed at the black-garbed figure. Amazement showed on his face, then baffled rage. His gun jerked up.

The masked man's hands swooped with incredible speed, came up filled with steel. The black guns blazed and roared, their titanic thunder beating back from the rock walls. Blalock whirled half about, slammed into Jess Drum, then fell forward to the floor. The Masked Rider whirled, vaulted over the ledge.

OTHER outlaw guns had snaked up. Blue Hawk's rifle blasted, and Drum reeled backward, his boot heels hammering the floor before he measured his length. The two others whirled and plunged into the tunnel.

Then half a dozen of the killers, obviously unable to withstand the deadly fire from the possemen closing in from the outer cave, came at a slashing run in from the tunnel. They were met by a withering fire from the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk that drove two of them to the floor at the first volley. The remainder threw down their guns and raised their hands.

Within five minutes more, hopelessly trapped between two fires, the last of the renegades had surrendered. Several of them, including Blalock and Drum, were dead, several others wounded.

The possemen, led by Sheriff Bill Condor, tramped into the cave. They stared with open amazement about the cavern, especially at the dead giant python.

Starr Tait ran straight into the arms of the young sheriff.

A few minutes after that, the sheriff had turned back to the masked man.

"I see now that Wayne Morgan wasn't stretchin' the truth any, Masked Rider, when he told me what yuh'd found here,"

he said. "Nobody on earth knows what vile and wicked things have happened here!"

"It's over now," the Masked Rider said quietly. "The outlaw bunch is wiped out, and over yonder in that pile is probably most of the loot they've taken in their raids. It can be returned to its rightful owners."

"And they can thank the Masked Rider and his trailmate here, Blue Hawk, for that," Starr Tait said quickly. She faced the masked man, added simply, "You saved my life."

The Masked Rider shifted uncomfortably. "If I did, this is all the thanks I want: Seein' yuh alive—and so beautiful!"

Bill Condor grinned. "Reckon I ought to resent that," he said, "but I don't. Well, this cleans out that snaky crew, but there still are some things I don't *sabe*. For one thing"—he pointed—"that hombre over there."

The man he pointed out was the pseudo Adam Tait. "Tait" was badly wounded, but sullen and defiant. The Masked Rider strode over to him.

"Yore game's up, mister," he said bluntly. "Yuh can talk or not, as yuh see fit. Most of the story I already know, but I'd rather hear you tell it to these gents. And there's just a bare chance that talkin' might make it easier for yuh."

"I'm not lookin' for anything easy," the man sneered. "But I'll talk, all right, just to show these brush-poppers how dumb they've been!"

The wounded man began to talk. He had just said his name was Luke Shann when the masked man broke in:

"Who—and what—was Jeffrey Blalock?"

"He was the smartest hombre I ever knew, and the meanest," Shann declared. "I've seen him kill half a dozen men, seen him make that devilish snake, which he kept smeared with some kind of phosphorous blue paint, kill as many more. Blalock has been a lot of other things beside an artist, includin' zoologist—and renegade killer."

Blalock, according to Shann, had become acquainted with the real Adam Tait when Tait had visited Utah several months before. He had gained the rancher's confidence and, through Red Teak, a member of the owlhoot crew, had learned Adam Tait's background and intimate details of his life thoroughly. Then Tait had been cold-bloodedly murdered, and one of Blalock's men who was about Tait's age—Luke Shann—had been cleverly made up by Blalock to resemble Tait, even to a scar on the fake Tait's face.

Shann had then returned to White Bear Basin, posing as Adam Tait, playing the rôle so realistically as to fool even Hugh and Starr Tait, even though they had been puzzled by their "uncle's" change from a mild, honest man to one who was vile-tempered and grasping.

THEN BLALOCK had shifted his entire outfit from Utah to White Bear Basin, partly because Utah was getting too hot for them, but principally because White Bear Basin gave promise of rich loot. After gaining control of the Star Cross, through the fake Adam Tait, Blalock had intended to use it as headquarters for a systematic looting of the rich basin.

"But before that could happen," Shann pointed out, "the two Tait youngsters had to be got rid of, so 'Adam Tait' could inherit the ranch. That's why we framed that theft charge against the boy, so he could be killed as he tried to escape from jail."

"Why—why, we could have been murdered any night as we slept!" Starr gasped, white-faced.

"Easy," Shann agreed sardonically, "and yuh would have been, except that it would have been too risky. If yuh'd been killed on the ranch it would have drawn suspicion toward me, and that might have ruined the whole scheme. Besides, although some of Blalock's outfit had taken jobs on other ranches, some up in the lumber camp, there wasn't any at Star Cross, except me."

"How'd that python get here?" the Masked Rider demanded.

"Blalock kept it with him everywhere he went. He had it shipped to Coldwater in a crate marked 'supplies', hired a freight wagon to haul it to his cabin at the mouth of the canyon. Then we brought it by hand here to the cave.

"He thought more of that devilish snake than he did of any of his men," Shann declared. "He brought it here with him

from Utah, and it was the only friend he had. All of us was afraid to cross him, 'cause we knew he could make the python kill anybody he wanted." Shann looked sullenly up at the Masked Rider. "You knowed I wasn't Adam Tait. How'd yuh guess it?"

"It wasn't exactly a guess," the Robin Hood rider said grimly. "I suspected from the first, from what I was told, that yuh was an imposter. Then, when I knocked yuh out at the Star Cross last night, I looked on yore chest and saw the coiled snake tattoo. That made it almost a cinch that yuh wasn't Adam Tait."

"And that clears up just about everything," grunted Bill Condor. "All but gettin' these skunks behind bars."

There was considerable confusion and noise as preparations were made to leave for Coldwater with the prisoners and loot.

"And this clears Hugh, too," Starr Tait said suddenly, happily. "He'll want to thank you, too, Masked Rider!"

She looked around the cavern, hopefully at first, then with deep puzzlement. The man in black had disappeared. . . .

At that moment the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk were riding through the shadowy, mist-filled pass that would let them out of Pipe-organ Canyon. The big stallion, Midnight, stepped almost daintily over the slippery rocks, followed by the wiry gray.

They emerged from the pass and into a golden flood of moonlight that sifted through the mist.

"Is it not beautiful, Senor?" Blue Hawk asked softly, glancing covertly at the tall, black-garbed rider beside him.

"And peaceful, Hawk. Beauty and peace go together, and where there is evil there can be neither!"

They rode on through the moonlight. And to the Robin Hood rider and his Yaqui trailmate the moonlight was like a symbol of hope for White Bear Basin—and for other spots over the broad West that yet remained to be freed from the brutal clutches of injustice and tyranny.

When Chief Crazy Eagle's raiders menace Wyoming, murdering and pillaging the settlers, Wayne Morgan rides in to prevent further massacre—and with his Yaqui pard to side him, battles to ferret out the sinister forces behind a savage reign of range terror in

TOMAHAWK TRAIL RACE

An Exciting Masked Rider Novel

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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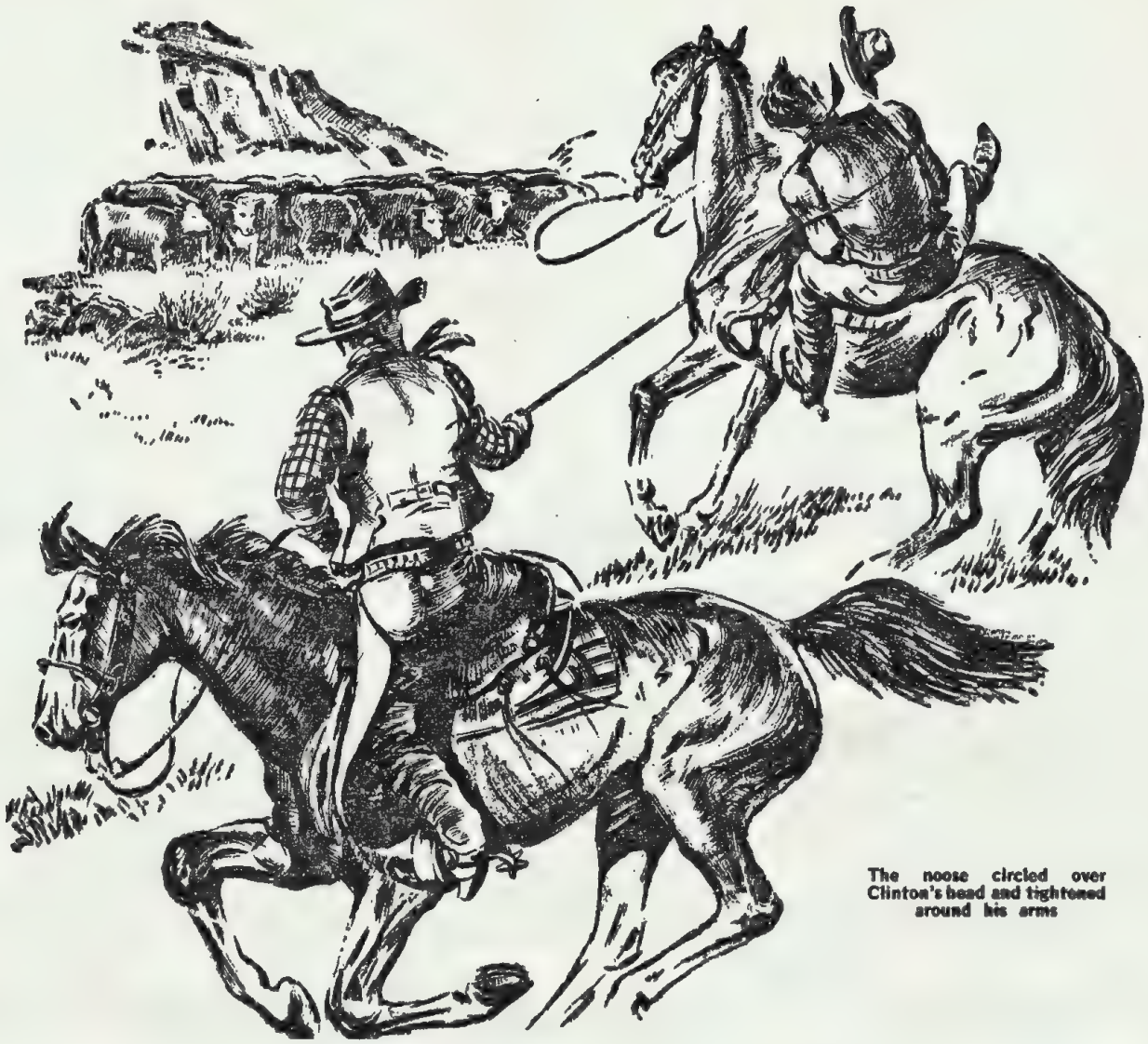

The noose circled over Clinton's head and tightened around his arms

A FAST ROPE

By CHUCK MARTIN

Tom Cartwright was a hard-working cowboy and he wasn't going to let a case of rustling interfere with business!

OLD TIMERS who knew Tom Cartwright best, nodded sagely when the square-shouldered Box C owner rode into Fargo. Cartwright rode with a deep seat in the saddle, long legs stretched out to full length, his battered Stetson drawn low over steady gray eyes, and all his movements were deliberate and slow.

Sim Benson was standing on the loading platform of his General Store, and Benson read all the signs. Cartwright seemed careless and lazy, but Benson knew better. There wasn't a faster man in Fargo with

his hands and feet than big Tom Cartwright, and that deceptive slowness masked a deep-seated weariness that would have stopped a less purposeful man.

Benson knew that Cartwright possessed a vast reservoir of strength and endurance which never seemed to grow less, although at times the level of that hidden reservoir was not visible on the surface. The storekeeper nodded when Cartwright stopped beside the platform and asked a simple question.

"Is Sheriff Brad Gaynor in town?"

Benson shook his head this time. "Brad left for South Fork this morning, Tom. He won't be back until tomorrow. Yuh have any luck today?"

Cartwright smiled grimly. "Most men make their own luck," he said slowly, and his voice was deep and low. "I found part of my shipping steers back in Hay Barn Canyon, but Bill Clinton wouldn't let me ride in. Tell the sheriff to send a wagon out to Hay Barn Canyon, and to order one coffin."

Sim Benson merely nodded his grizzled head. He could picture the shoot-out between the two men, and he knew what the result would be. Being range-wise, there was no need for questions.

"Better put up yore horse and get some sleep, Tom," he suggested quietly. "Yuh've been ridin' trail for five days, and yuh're gauntin' up some. Yuh'll need all yore speed when yuh come up with Speedy Clinton."

Tom Cartwright drew a deep breath and nodded agreement. Only his face showed the weariness of the long hunt he had made. He possessed the uncanny ability to relax completely, and he never burned up his vitality by just keeping active to use up nervous energy.

A bott fly buzzed up from the ground and struck at the gray horse low on the neck. Cartwright's right hand whipped out and down in a flashing brown blur. The horse twitched its skin, and the vicious attacker fell to the ground on lifeless wings. Tom Cartwright's hand rested easy on the shell-studded belt just behind his .45 six-shooter.

"Speedy Clinton is fast enough," he admitted slowly. "But he talks too much with his mouth."

"Yuh think it was them Clintons who burned down yore hay stacks and barns, and ran off yore shippers?" Benson asked quietly.

Tom Cartwright showed no excitement or anger as he nodded his head. His was not a nature to build up and enlarge upon little tragedies, or to work himself into a killing rage with emotional excitement. He faced life as it was, and then did what had to be done.

"They did it," he said calmly. "I'd have to just move off the Box C if I lose my shipping beef. I owe taxes for three years, and Jim Hurley down at the bank has carried me for eighteen months. Yuh see Speedy in town?"

Sim Benson hesitated. He liked Tom Cartwright; considered him a solid citizen. "Speedy" Clinton, on the other hand, had few friends in Fargo. The man lost large sums of money at gambling, and he did it with a smile. Perhaps some day Clinton would meet a faster man with a hand-gun, but the seven notches on the handle of his gun gave mute but unmistakable evidence that Clinton's nickname had not been lightly bestowed.

"So he is in town," Cartwright read the storekeeper's hesitation shrewdly. "Up at the Casino, mebbe?"

SIM BENSON knew that Cartwright would see the grulla horse tied to the rack in front of the saloon and gaming house. The grulla was also speedy, and it carried a brand that could not be mistaken —the 2 C in a box. Sim Benson knew that evasion was futile.

"Yeah, he's up there, Tom. Better bed down with me for the night. Yuh're wore down to the hocks from five days and nights poundin' leather after those lost shippers of yores."

"I'll get a bit of hot grub at Limpy's lunch room," Cartwright said carelessly. "Build me up where I'm all tore down, and like yuh know, a cowboy can make up his sleep in the winter."

Sim Benson watched Cartwright ride down the street, sitting deep in his scarred saddle. The Box C was a one-man outfit, but Cartwright did the work of three ordinary men. He never seemed to get tired, and he was on the way to making some important money for the first time in four years.

Beef was bringing good prices. Cartwright had started with a few head of

she-stuff, and had stocked his five sections with weaner calves. Now those calves were ready for market. Three hundred head at forty dollars a round. Tom Cartwright could pay all his bills, and have enough working capital to insure his future success.

But Speedy Clinton was the fastest gunhawk in all the Fargo country. Fast, and deadly accurate. Sim Benson wished that Sheriff Brad Gaynor had stayed in town. He shrugged and began to close the store for the night, but his eyes wrinkled into a frosty smile as he remembered the speed with which Cartwright had killed the bott fly.

Tom Cartwright ate with a deliberate enjoyment that was a testimonial to his perfect health and digestion. There had been little time in the past five years for fun or frolic, except in the rough games of the cow-camps, and the salty humor of men like himself.

Limpy Ross had been a cow-camp cook until the misery in his wounded leg had forced him to less strenuous work in town. A cow-camp cook always had been king on the round-ups, and Limpy had never relinquished his well-earned crown. A cowboy either ate what Limpy put on his plate, or he settled his score with the old *cucinero.*

"Have another helpin' of pot-hole beans, Tom," the old cook suggested. "How was the huntin'?"

Cartwright accepted the ladle of beans and reached for a thick slab of salt-rising bread. "Yuh're still the best cook in fourteen states, Limpy," he gave sincere praise. "I jumped up a stag in the brush."

Limpy Ross nodded and glanced at Cartwright's smoke-grimed gun. He knew the name of the stag, and he knew what had happened. Men around Fargo didn't ask questions just to make small talk when they already knew the answers.

"Have a wedge of this here green apple pie, and a helpin' of bear sign," he said quietly as he pushed two round doughnuts in front of Cartwright. "Yuh need any help, cow feller?"

Cartwright soaked a doughnut in his coffee and took a huge bite. His gray eyes smiled his thanks, and his big chest seemed to fill out as he cleaned up every morsel set before him.

"I can handle it, Limpy," he stated simply, and then his eyes puckered at the corners. "Yuh might pass the word," he suggested. "Speedy will drop in for his vittles before long. His brother Bill is still layin' out there in Hay Barn Canyon."

Limpy nodded. He wiped his hands on his apron, lifted his old Peacemaker six-shooter a trifle in the holster from force of long habit, and told Cartwright that the damage was four bits.

"I'll tell him the bad news," the cook promised. "Take care of yoreself, cow feller."

Cartwright threw a half dollar on the counter and picked out a tooth pick. He almost collided with a tall slender man as he opened the door, but Cartwright went on through as the newcomer stepped aside. Neither spoke, but that moment of meeting showed the difference between them.

Both were six-footers. While Cartwright was wide of shoulder and thick in the chest, he was saddle-lean from the waist down. A hundred and eighty pounds of rawhide and whalebone; all give and no break.

The second man was built for speed, and it showed in the way he side-stepped like a dancer to avoid collision. His right hand flashed to his holstered gun, and his blue eyes were narrowed and cold. Eyes set close together, a long hawkish nose above a small rakish mustache, shadowing a thin gash of a mouth. This was Speedy Clinton, a hundred and fifty-five pounds of deadly swiftness.

CARTWRIGHT brushed past and headed for his horse tied at the rail. His back was to Clinton as he pulled the slip-knot and stepped up in the stirrup, and he rode up the darkening street to the livery barn without a backward glance.

Speedy Clinton took a seat at the counter with his back to a wall, and facing the front door. His eyes scanned the three cowboys who were already eating. All three avoided his gaze, but Limpy Ross stepped up in front of Clinton and blocked off his view to the door.

"What will it be, Clinton?" Ross asked brusquely.

"One side," Clinton growled. "Don't stand between me and the door!"

"The only orders yuh give in my place is for grub!" Ross drawled acidly. "Yuh

order what yuh want, and then yuh eat what yuh order!"

"Some day I'm goin' to get tired enough of yore slack jaw, *cucinero,*" Clinton murmured. "Give me a T-bone rare, and a pair of eggs sunny-side up. Coffee right now!"

"Get tired enough right now," Limpy retorted, and his hand was on the gun under his white apron. "Back, say ten years ago, it wouldn't take yuh but an hour to spend the night in any cow-camp where I made a hand."

Clinton looked up and saw the gnarled hand on the old Peacemaker .45. He shrugged his slender shoulders, placed both hands on the counter, and sucked through his upper front teeth.

"This ain't ten years ago," he remarked. "That Box C waddy what just barged out. What put him on the prod?"

"Tom Cartwright ain't never on the prod," Limpy Ross contradicted truculently. "He's been ridin' gun-sign on rustlers who have been stealin' him out of the country, and Tom caught up with one of 'em."

"Yeah?" Clinton asked. "What's the tally?"

"One down and one to go, the way I get it," Limpy grunted. "T-bone rare comin' right up. Pair of cackles on the side, sunny-side up. Here's yore coffee." And he slid a thick mug in front of Clinton.

Clinton rolled a brown paper quirly with deft fingers, long slender fingers that should have belonged to a professional gambler. Then he drank the hot coffee slowly as he smoked, and his eyes narrowed and brightened under the hooded lids.

Limpy threw a steak on his grill and broke a pair of eggs. He could see that Clinton was puzzled, but the old cookie was sparing of speech with those he disliked. His was the raw courage of the old-timer who had seen most things once, and many of them several times. If he lived to be ninety he would be cooking for cowboys, but if the Big Ramrod on the Universal Spread called his number that very night, it was all one to Limpy Ross.

With the eggs atop the steak, and a side of hashed browns, he took it all on a sizzling platter to Clinton. Then he refilled the empty coffee mug and started to move away.

"Who was this creepin' turtle Cartwright matched smoke-poles with?" Clinton demanded harshly.

Old Limpy stiffened and arched his grizzled brows. "How should I know this rustler's handle?" he countered. "All I know is that he is still layin' back there in Hay Barn Canyon where Tom Cartwright finally found his rustled beef herd!"

"You said—Hay Barn Canyon?"

"You heard me!"

Speedy Clinton's face grew deadly under the yellow light from the coal-oil lamps. His right hand hovered over the butt of his six-shooter as he spoke in a thin whisper.

"Yuh get salty with me when I ask a civil question, I'll—"

"Yuh'll do what?" Limpy demanded gruffly, but his gun was in his hand under the white apron.

Like a good gambler, Speedy Clinton knew when his hand was beaten. He also knew that Limpy Ross would blast him to eternity and never bat an eye. Clinton picked up knife and fork.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Reckon I'm kinda jumpy tonight. Yuh seen Bill lately?"

"Not since he rode out to Hay Barn Canyon," Ross answered stiffly, and he backed away to his big stove.

Speedy Clinton attacked the steak. All his movements were as quick as the sudden little runs of the desert swifts; the tiny lizards with which the rangeland abounded. Now his narrowed eyes were thoughtful, and his expression puzzled. He ate half his steak, pushed away from the counter, and beckoned to Limpy with a jerk of his head.

"How much?" he demanded.

Limpy glared at the unfinished steak. "Anythin' wrong with that portion of cow critter?" he asked.

"So-so," Clinton snapped. "How much?"

"Yuh don't like hashed brown spuds?"

Clinton threw a five dollar bill on the counter and surged to his feet. "Keep the change!" he shouted angrily. "Was it Bill who matched smoke with Cartwright?"

Limpy pulled out a wooden drawer from under the counter. He made change, pushed it toward Clinton, and then gazed levelly at the gambler.

"A buck and a half, and I'll give that steak to a hungry dog," he said shortly. "Pick up yore change, *Mister* Clinton!"

Two spots of vivid crimson color leaped to the high cheekbones of the angry cattleman. When cow-country folks didn't like a man, they called him "Mister."

"The dead man?" Clinton asked in a harsh whisper. "Was it—Bill?"

"Mebbe so yuh better ride out and have a look-see," Limpy suggested. "I'm just a *cucinero,* remember?"

UP IN the hay-loft above the livery barn Tom Cartwright raised his head when a finger of sunlight filtered through a crack and tugged at his eyelids. He had gone to bed "standing-up" by merely pulling off his high-heeled boots. He was fully awake when he pushed back his single blanket and felt for the gun in his holster.

Cartwright pulled on his foot-gear and came down the ladder backward. An old hostler called a greeting, told him that Speedy Clinton had saddled his grulla horse at daylight, and had ridden west with the cattle buyer.

"Give Sandy a measure of grain with his hay," Cartwright told the hostler, and handed him a silver dollar. "I'll make my breakfast down at Limpy's while my hoss is eatin'."

Limpy Ross was glad to see the cowboy again, and waited for his order. He knew what it would be; they had both worked on the same outfits before Cartwright had stocked the Box C which his father had left him.

"Ham and, a side of hots, and a quart of coffee," Cartwright said with a grin, and now the lines of weariness had left his rugged features.

"Comin' right up, cow feller," Limpy answered with a wide smile, and after he had poured batter and cracked the eggs, he came back to talk some.

"I passed the word to Speedy Clinton. I didn't mention the dead rustler's name, but Speedy caught the drift. He rode out there to Hay Barn Canyon last night, and he's gone there again with Joe Sloan, the cattle buyer."

"I'm goin' out there myself," Cartwright said carelessly. "I've got some business of my own with Joe Sloan."

"Better wait for the sheriff to get back, you bein' what a hand might call law-abidin'," Limpy Carson suggested, and he watched Cartwright's face closely.

"The law has enough to do," Cartwright answered with a shrug. "Coosa, that ham shore smells good!"

"Double order of ham," Limpy corrected. "Got to iron the wrinkles out of yore belly so's yuh can do yore chores. How old are yuh, Tom?"

"Yuh want to look at my teeth?" Cartwright answered with a smile. "Twenty-seven; why?"

"Speedy Clinton is thirty-two," Limpy said quietly. "Keep yore gun in yore fist, cowboy!"

Cartwright ate his meal in silence, downed the slab of green apple pie Limpy placed before him, and washed it down with a couple more cups of cowboy coffee. He nodded when Limpy told him earnestly that he never ruined good coffee by putting too much creek water in it. Then he paid his check and walked slowly back to the livery barn where he stopped to wash his hands in the horse trough.

In the shadows of a stall, Cartwright tried his six-shooter a time or two to make sure against hang. Then, his jaw tight and square, he mounted the gray gelding and rode out of town just as Fargo was rousing from its sleep. . . .

Two half-grown boys were riding guard on the mouth of Hay Barn Canyon when Tom Cartwright rode up just as the sun was slanting over the high rimrock. One of the boys called Cartwright by his first name, said that they had bunched the cattle and had driven them around the bend of the canyon, and that the buyer was now cutting out the tops.

Cartwright smiled and told the boys they were doing good work, and that perhaps he would need some extra help when branding time rolled around. Then he twitched his six-shooter loose of hang and rode carelessly up the canyon. He sat loosely in the saddle, but well forward, and he might have been riding on a neighborly visit to tell Joe Sloan to stop at the Box C and look over his shipping beef.

The cattle buyer was sitting his horse at the edge of the bunched herd when Cartwright came into view. He was a short, stocky man with a handful of cigars in his upper vest pocket, and he carried

a tally book in his left hand. He called a greeting to Cartwright, made some figures in his book, and offered the Box C man a cigar.

Cartwright declined the smoke and rolled a cigarette. Speedy Clinton turned his grulla horse to face Cartwright squarely, and his little eyes were watchful.

"I've got three hundred head of prime beef to sell, Joe," Cartwright told the buyer. "Threes and fours, and they'll grade heavy. Finish up yore business first, and then we can talk some."

JOE SLOAN chewed on an unlighted cigar. He consulted his tally, glanced down at the knotted strings attached to his saddle-horn, and addressed Clinton.

"Four hundred and twelve head, I make it," he said slowly. "Some of that stuff is spotted, Clinton. About three hundred head is prime, but the rest is poor grade and off color. I'll give yuh forty dollars a round and cut the tops. I can't use those culls and canners this season. Well?"

"Cut 'em," Clinton agreed without hesitation. "Then I'll ride back to town with yuh for my check."

"I'll pay off when my tally men make the count," the buyer agreed.

"Three hundred head at forty a round. I'll give or take a head," Clinton suggested. "That's a fair enough deal for both of us."

The cattle buyer clamped down on his cigar. "I'll make the tally just the same," he corrected. "You can give me a clean bill of sale?"

"I've got the papers made out," Clinton answered brusquely. "Every head under our Two C Box iron!"

"Fair enough," Sloan agreed, and he turned to Cartwright. "Where yuh holdin' yore beef, Tom?" he asked.

Tom Cartwright reached in his upper vest pocket, brought out some papers and passed them to Sloan.

"Most of my steers I bought as weaners," he explained quietly. "Those papers tell who sold me the calves, the dates of purchase, and all solid color."

"That's the way I like to do business," Sloan said heartily, as he looked over the papers. "Where yuh holdin' yore stuff, Tom?"

"Hay Barn Canyon," Cartwright stated. "My tally shows three hundred and eight head, and forty dollars a round is all right with me."

Joe Sloan looked up with a frown. Speedy Clinton edged his horse away and dropped a hand to his gun. Tom Cartwright took down his catch rope and shook out a noose, and he did not look at Clinton.

"Yuh said Hay Barn Canyon?" Sloan spoke gruffly. "I just rode from the other end with Clinton, and I didn't see any Box C critters!"

"You saw them," Cartwright corrected. "I'll just rope out any one of those steers and show yuh what I mean."

He started his horse and rode toward the herd with his loop swinging. Speedy Clinton struck for his gun and shouted a warning. "Stay away from my shippers, Cartwright! Yuh dab a loop on my stock, I'll let yuh have it!"

The six-shooter leaped to his hand with his thumb curling back the hammer as he finished speaking. Tom Cartwright neck-reined his horse sharply to the left, and the snaky loop shot from his hand in a backward Hooly-Ann cast.

Cartwright spurred his horse when the noose circled over Clinton's head and tightened around the 2C Box man's arms. Cartwright's horse leaped into a dead run, and Clinton's gun roared as its owner was jerked from the high saddle.

All the laziness had left Tom Cartwright as he swung his horse and hit the ground like a calf roper tying up his veal for the branding iron. He jerked a piggin' string from his belt and flipped the loop over the stunned man's boots. Two wraps and a half-hitch, and Speedy Clinton was hobbled.

Clinton sat up and dug under his vest for a hide-out gun, but the snub-nosed weapon did not clear leather. Tom Cartwright was a working cowboy now, doing a cowboy's work. His left fist pistoned out in a short hook that caught Clinton under the chin and stretched the 2C Box man out cold on his back.

Cartwright flipped his catch over and took a turn around the limp wrists with his catch rope. Then he levered to his feet and turned to the cattle buyer with a grim smile twitching his lips.

"You and him," Sloan said slowly. "I heard you were edgin' at each other, and he meant to kill yuh. I'd have been a

witness for Clinton, on account of you were cuttin' his stock against his orders. What's this all about, Cartwright?"

Cartwright walked to Clinton's horse and took down the catch rope. He mounted his own horse with the loop swinging in his right hand.

"Yuh mind helpin' me stretch out a steer between us?" he asked quietly. "I want to show yuh what yuh're buyin'."

"That makes me an accessory after the fact, but you must have a good reason," Sloan grumbled, taking down his rope.

CARTWRIGHT rode up to the herd and caught a big steer by the horns. Joe Sloan rode behind and made a heel-catch, and the trained horses stretched the catch out between them. Cartwright left the saddle and tied off the hind legs, and he motioned for Sloan to dismount.

The two men hunkered down beside the tied steer, and Cartwright pointed to the brand on the left shoulder.

"That was orginally my Box C brand," he explained, and traced the scars with a forefinger. "Those Clinton brothers vented my brand and added the Two in front of my C. The new brand is healed and haired over, but I've got proof!"

"Hold it, Tom!" Sloan said sharply. "Anything yuh say will be used against yuh. Yonder comes Sheriff Gaynor, and he will want to hear yore wau wau!"

Cartwright turned to watch the galloping sheriff, and then he walked to a clump of greasewood. He rooted up the desert weed and pulled something from the hole just as Gaynor rode up.

"I got here in time!" the peace officer shouted, and then he saw the bound man on the ground over to the side. "What's goin' on here, Cartwright?" he demanded.

"Just helpin' the law do its work," Cartwright said calmly. "Slide down and rest yore saddle, Sheriff. Got somethin' here yuh might want to see."

Gaynor dropped from the saddle and ground-tied his horse with trailing reins. He hunkered down on his boot-heels and watched Tom Cartwright smooth out a soggy hide. Cartwright spoke slowly as he pointed to the brand. "I shot this critter yesterday," he explained.

"Which makes yuh out a rustler," the sheriff interrupted coldly. "You heard him, Sloan. Keep on talkin' Cartwright. Yuh just might talk yoreself into a noose!"

"Now yuh take this hide," Cartwright continued doggedly. "Originally it was a Box C brand. If yuh look close, yuh can see where a Two has been burned in, right in front of the C."

"Come again, cow feller," the sheriff grunted, his hand close to his gun. "Just you keep on givin' up head!"

Cartwright flipped the green hide over. Then he told Sloan to take one end, and he held the hide up to the light.

"Look close, gents," he suggested, but somehow his voice had changed. Now it was twangy with restrained anger as his finger traced the brand on the fleshy side of the hide. "You can see the old Box C brand plain now. It's an old burn, and healed even under the hide. Take a good long look at the Two and tell me what yuh see!"

Joe Sloan stared, then nodded his head. "I've seen it proved that-a-way in court," he admitted. "Let yore gun ride in leather, Sheriff. Cartwright has caught you a rustler!"

Brad Gaynor stretched to his feet and stared at Speedy Clinton who was now trying to sit up. Then the sheriff glanced at the gun in Cartwright's holster.

"You had every right to shoot the rustlin' son," he said sternly. "Yuh mind tellin' me why yuh didn't?"

Tom Cartwright shook his tousled head. "I had to do it this way when you were out of town, Sheriff," he explained. "Yuh see, I had a shoot-out with Bill Clinton, and it looked bad for me. Speedy was fixin' to collect the money for this herd of shippers of mine, and he meant to bring me showdown. He'd taken up for his brother, and I knew I couldn't beat him to the gun!"

"This rustler's got seven notches whittled on the handles of his meat gun," the sheriff said, examining Speedy Clinton, "and there he is all tied up for the law. You admit he had yuh beat on the draw, so like as not yuh sneaked up behind him and buffaloed him over the skull with yore six."

"Nuh, uh," Joe Sloan corrected. "I never saw a waddy handle a rope so slick in all my days. Tom recovered his shipping herd and caught you a rustler all at the same time. And all he used was his head, and—a fast rope!"

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going now," he said. "Going to finish this thing I've started, Tate or no Tate." He headed for the door.

He heard the girl cry out behind him. He went out into the street and felt the glances of amazed men follow him. At Curt Dolph's bank and gold depository, he turned in. The lean-faced gold buyer behind the cage turned a shade whiter when he recognized the lanky visitor.

"Where's Dolph?"

CAL BOZEMAN shoved on into the private office beyond while the thin-faced man was still gasping. He found the office empty. He retraced his steps and went across the street to the Miner's Rest, a saloon that numbered among Dolph's many other enterprises. The barman started to set out a glass and a bottle, but Cal shook his head.

"Seen Dolph?" he asked softly.

"Him and Tate Gill went over to the Fryin' Pan to git a bite," the barman replied. "Dolph claims he's tryin' mighty hard to avoid trouble with you. It'll be a plain case of self-defense if yuh git killed, Bozeman."

Cal turned toward the batwings. "Yeah," he said over his shoulder, "that's the way Dolph handles a killin'—putting the other man in wrong at the outset!"

Small groups watched Cal turn in at the Fryin' Pan. He saw Edith Flint serving Tate Gill, a lanky, cold-eyed man, and Curt Dolph at a table. Dolph was smugly middle-aged, gray at the temples. An oily smile gave his round face a look of warm amiability. The smile was as false as the gold teeth that flashed when Cal Bozeman approached the table.

Patrons at the counter turned to stare nervously.

"Why, hello, Cal," Dolph said. "Sit down and have a bite to eat."

"No, thanks, Dolph. I'm not hungry."

Tate Gill's dark eyes glowed hard and bright. "Better accept Dolph's invitation," he suggested in a voice that grated.

Cal stood spraddle-legged, facing both men. Edith Flint pressed back against the wall, the knuckles of her hands gripped hard and white on the platter she held. Cal knew that a fight was not in the making—yet. When it came time for a shoot-out, Tate Gill would yawn with lazy indifference, with the confidence of a killer who believed that no man could beat his draw. He would stand up slowly, rip out a challenge, soft and furious. Thundering guns would punctuate his words. He would kill his man, then calmly drop back into his chair and resume eating. Or, at least that was the way Tate Gill liked to do things.

"Bob Flint was a fool," Cal told Dolph. "You offered him a chance to go in with you with me, you and Bob sharing equally in running the Speckled Nugget, with you acting as manager. Bob refused, telling you he already had a partner—meaning me. Now, Bob Flint is dead, proving he wasn't a very smart man."

Cal heard Edith gasp. He saw warm crimson flood her lovely face. She started to say something, bit back her words. Tate Gill's eyelids drooped. The smile rode Curt Dolph's face. He chuckled softly.

"Bob Flint was a nice old man," he admitted, with a sad shake of his head. "Too bad he got himself killed."

"Nasty temper done that for him," Tate Gill broke in, grinning like a panther. "The old fool pulled a gun on me. Might have lived longer otherwise."

Cal silenced the gunhawk with a stony look.

"Flint willed me his share of the Speckled Nugget," he told Dolph. "Will is filed and registered at the county seat. That's where I've been—getting things fixed up legal so that Bob's daughter, Edith could inherit, just in case."

Dolph nodded and smiled grimly. "You filed an injunction, compelling me to stop all work at the mine. Not so smart, Cal, but there are other ways. Those I. O. U's I hold on old Bob Flint aren't like a mortgage and the court might decide in your favor. However,—"

Cal smiled tightly. "*Those* I. O. U.'s aren't worth the paper they are written on," he drawled. "They're bald forgeries."

"Gents who buck Curt Dolph don't have much luck," Tate Gill cut in.

"I'm willing to give you a reasonable partnership," Dolph went on, ignoring Gill. "Better than I offered old Flint."

Cal frowned. "You're word isn't worth a 'dobe dollar. You just had your paid gunslick Blue try to bushwhack me with a shotgun awhile ago!" His eyes blazed.

"No such thing!" Dolph protested. "Why, Bozeman, there are a dozen men

who claim they heard you swear you'd get Blue on sight. I've heard them talking it around for days."

Cal understood the meaning of that. It was just Curt Dolph's way of clearing one of his paid killers in the eyes of the law, proving justification before a crime was committed. It might not work in the case of Claude Blue. Cal dropped the subject, smiled tightly.

"What's your proposition, Dolph?"

"I'll put in the Zephir, Blue Moon and Grass Roots mines," Dolph offered. "You ante up with your Speckled Nugget and drop all court proceedings. That'll be the company, share and share alike—fifty, fifty on everything. Just give me managing control and let me run the mines. Fair enough?"

DOLPH'S eyes had hardened. He leaned across the table at though trying hard to read Cal's thoughts.

"No," Cal said abruptly. "It'd turn out just like all your other partnership deals. You'd pay me nothing for my share, and if I complained you have me bushwhacked. That's the way you've done to all your partners. I've got a better idea. I can't operate my mine and fight against bushwhack lead."

Dolph flushed crimson with anger. Tate Gill stiffened.

"We'll form that partnership you suggested," Cal continued, "but we'll do it my way and put in a little clause that if one of us partners should die that the other one is to inherit everything—with no strings attached."

Dolph looked startled.

"That's going to be somebody's death warrant," Cal said grimly. "Maybe mine or it might be yours!'

At the counter and tables, diners sat, staring. Cal heard Edith gasp.

"Pretty sure of yourself, ain't you?" Dolph purred softly.

He took a piece of paper from his pocket and started writing. Tate Gill watched Cal Bozeman through slitted eyes. He just sat there, wooden-faced, grim.

"I'll draw up the agreement," Dolph said, and went on writing. "There are enough witnesses present to make it legal." He finally shoved the paper over to Cal. "There's my signature," he said handing Cal the pencil. "Sign!"

Cal read it over carefully and then signed his name. He looked up and calmly handed the signed agreement to Edith Flint.

"Have Sam Clay put this in his strong box," he told the girl. "Tell him to give it to either me or Dolph, whichever one comes for it."

Dolph shook his head, managed a frosty smile. "You're a cool one, Bozeman. You've at least got sand."

"Stand up, Dolph," Cal snapped. "You're wearing a gun."

Dolph's round face blanched white. "Talk to Tate Gill," he said. "Tate has a way with trouble when trouble seeks me."

"This is between you and me, Dolph."

"Don't be absurd, Bozeman!" Dolph laughed nervously. "Why do you think I hire Gill?"

"Get up or I'll shoot you where you sit."

Dolph shrugged. "That would be murder. They'd stretch your neck."

He flicked a signal with his eyes.

Edith's face was a white oval above the tray she held. "Look out, Cal!" she cried suddenly.

Tate Gill put a hand to his mouth and yawned. He stretched lazily, and stood up facing Cal Bozeman. He looked grimly confident. He intended to show this cocky rooster that no man could beat his lightning-fast draw. Short-clipped words of challenge formed on his twisted lips.

Cal lashed out with a balled fist, upsetting the pattern of things. Tate Gill went down, groping blindly to right himself.

Beside upsetting plans, that took Dolph off balance too. He had reacted to the old pattern. When he got Tate Gill's signal, that yawn, he had expected that thundering guns, powdersmoke and death were in the making.

Now he was on his feet, clawing for his gun. A look of panic flashed over his face when Cal whipped up a .45 and shot him through the chest.

Dolph dropped his gun, stumbled back. He clawed the table for support.

Tate Gill stood up, weaving like a drunken man, still groggy from the blow on the chin.

"Kill him, Tate!" Dolph cried, blood frothing his lips. "Kill Bozeman!"

The killer swayed there, half, crouched,

as though weighing his chances to come out of it alive. He looked into the bore of Cal's .45. He could draw and fire with such deadly accuracy that Cal's bullet might not stop him in time. Cal knew that, but he gave the man time to make up his mind.

"It ain't worth the risk," Tate said dryly, looking down at his boss. "Yuh're cashin' anyway, Dolph."

Dolph swore a vicious oath. "I lied at the inquest," he spat out viciously, glaring with hatred at Tate Gill. "Bob Flint wasn't toting a gun the day Tate killed him. Gill murdered him—cold-blooded." Hatred filled his eyes as he looked up from the floor at Cal. "Now, Tate," he snarled, "you yellow rat, start killing Cal Bozeman or else stick around and face a hangnoose for Flint's murder!"

That was the dying man's effort to wreck vengeance on an enemy. A terrible fear etched Tate Gill's lean face. There was desperation in the look he bent on Cal Bozeman. Tate's hand filled, coming up like a streak. Cal shot him between the eyes. Gill toppled forward, dying. He had been too slow.

Cal was trembling when he walked over to the counter and sat on a stool. "Coffee," he said to Edith Flint. "And make it black and strong. I'm still so blamed scared, I'm weak all over."

She gave him the coffee, and smiled. "Cal I'm proud of you. Being scared isn't a sin. It shows you're human." Her eyes were shining when she looked at him. There was no further need for words.

Headliners in the Next Issue

WAYNE MORGAN pits himself against savage redskins and renegade whites in TOMAHAWK TRAIL RACE, the smashing complete Masked Rider novel by Walker A. Tompkins featured next issue. It's a humdinger of a yarn that races with excitement and action from start to finish—a yarn of scalping, plundering Indians who serve as the henchmen of a fiendish, scheming range villain. Wayne Morgan and Blue Hawk are at their best in this grand reading treat!

* * * * *

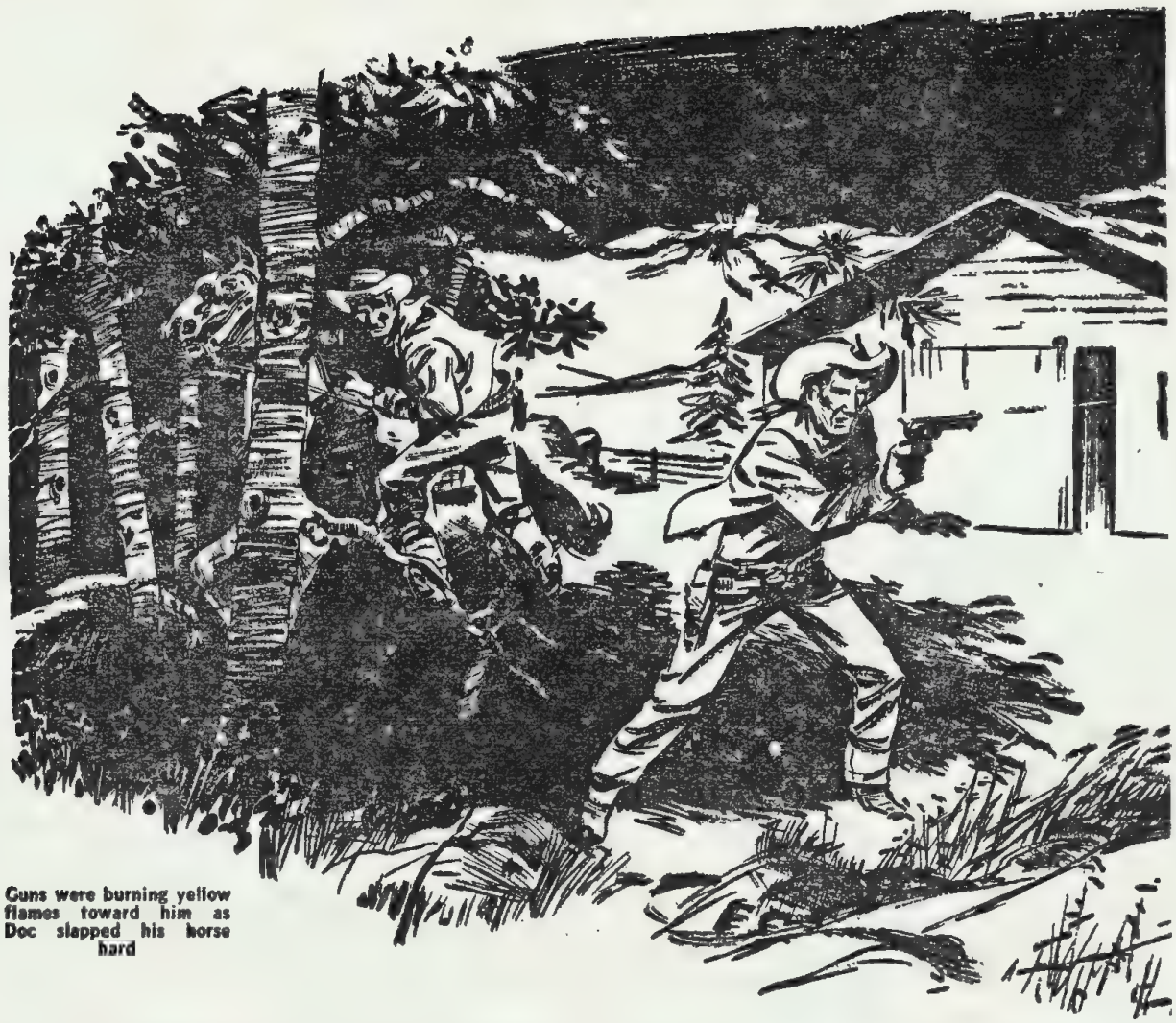
PACKED with gunsmoke conflict and deep human interest, SALT OF THE EARTH, by Allan K. Echols, is one of the finest novelets in many a year. Meet the tall young Texan, Bruce Carter, whose guns settle a tense dispute—in a way that will hold you breathless! Meet all the other folks at Dobson's Trading Post—in a story that will bring a glow to your heart.

* * * * *

THE struggle between a man and a wild horse has never been better described than in BLACK DEVIL, next issue's story by Burl Tuttle which is in itself a miniature epic of the Rio Grande. Chuck Olney's hunt for the big black stallion, and what happens after the animal is captured, will thrill you mightily.

* * * * *

AMONG the other stories in our next gala issue, there will be a grand yarn by James P. Olsen entitled HAIR OF THE DOGIE. Rusty Lee Quest sets out to find who has been stealing the QLL stock—and what he discovers delivers a powerful punch!



Guns were burning yellow flames toward him as Doc slapped his horse hard

A Complete Novelet

IN DOCTOR

CHAPTER I

Dirty Work at the Bridge

WHEN young Dr. Mark Hall stepped off the limited at Latigo Junction, it was dark and rainy. He pulled coat collar up about his neck and hurried for the junction's dimly lighted little waiting room some five Pullmans up the track. He must see that the coffin was transferred promptly from limited to branch-line train.

He hadn't seen two other men swing off the day-coach steps of the halting train. They had slipped into the shadows quickly, before even the station agent up ahead saw them.

Walking through the rain, the young doctor threw up his rugged dark head and listened. The bawl of cattle in the shipping pens! Ah, like the smell of ether in a hospital! A new challenge every hour, sick people and cattle on the move.

Doc Mark Hull's Arrival at Latigo Junction

JIM'S BOOTS

By CLEE WOODS

It'd always been that way with old Doctor Jim—his uncle up there in the coffin now. Doc wanted little more than to be like Doctor Jim. Earthy and salty, but full of compassion for his fellowman.

This was Montana cow country. He'd been bred and born to the Colorado range, but there would be little difference, he imagined.

For a moment he paused, listening to the bawling, off at the loading pens. She-stuff mostly. And an old bull mad. His ears could tell those things as easily as they could detect an imperfect heart through a stethoscope. Mingling with these sounds was the roar of the flooded river which the train had just crossed.

He started on for the waiting room. Over an hour until the little branch-line train would pull out. But he could hear its lazy engine panting on the spur across from him. Maybe there would be time to take a walk over to the shipping pens, even in the rain. Be good just to—

is a Signal for Gun-bursting Range Conflict!

Quick steps to his right cut off the thought. He spun about, for those steps seemed ominous somehow. Two men loomed close in front of him, blocking off the light from the station. Up ahead the limited's locomotive was coughing and jerking the train into motion.

"Are you Doctor Mark Hall?" one of the men asked.

THE speaker was a six-footer, fully as well built as the doctor himself. But heavier than Doc's one hundred and seventy pounds. Beside the speaker was a little man with humped shoulders.

"Yes, I'm Doctor Hall," Doc answered.

"Good," said the little man in his sharp voice. "I'd like to put a word in early for a job punchin' cows on yore Circle Eighty-one ranch. You just inherited it from yore uncle, old Doctor Jim Hall, didn't yuh?"

"Well, yes, I did. But I'm not quite used to the idea of it all yet."

Doc was ruffled by the man's blunt approach to a matter about which he felt very keenly. Doctor Jim was half saint to him already, and he didn't like this man's talk. Too much like greedy pouncing upon what Doctor Jim had left.

Doc was aware of two more passengers alighting a couple of Pullmans ahead. A man and a little girl about eight. They'd boarded the train only a few hours before.

The beautiful blond child had made friends with him in the dining car. Once she stopped by his seat to chat in her friendly little way. He loved kids. The chief thing the child wanted to talk about was a hospital where she'd been. She'd had an attack of appendicitis, she said, but her daddy wouldn't let them operate unless she got "heaps and heaps worse."

"Well," said the little man, "I'd sure like a chance at a job when yuh're ready to hire. My name's Decker."

The fellow thrust out his hand as if in cow country goodfellowship. Then—Whack! Something had swung swiftly in the big man's left hand. It struck Doc on the head. He reeled. The man was swinging again. Doc whirled, lunged for him. He drove his fist at the big man's chin. But the little one made a flying tackle and hit Doc about the knees. The big man's club struck him across the shoulder.

Still the young doctor fought them. The big man landed another blow on Doc's head. That addled him. Another blow knocked Doc so cold he fell like a dead man.

The big man swore under his breath. It was a mighty risky business, this having to club a man and struggle with him, when they'd planned just one good lick before the hasty getaway.

"Work fast," the big man said under his breath. "Grab his heels!"

The big man seized the doctor's traveling bag and tossed it off into the darkness. "I'll be back for that before the Junction train pulls out," he said.

He grabbed hold of Doc's arms and the small man lifted Hall's feet. They moved off down the track, into the darkness back where the train had come in. Down this way there were no lighted houses, and very little chance of being caught.

The roar of the big river encouraged the pair. They struggled faster with their unconscious burden. Both men were panting now, as much from excitement as from exertion. Out onto the bridge that spanned the hundred-yard river they went. Panting harder, and hurrying in still greater excitement.

"Want to slit his gullet before we dunk him?" the little man asked.

"No," the big one answered. "Let it look like a case of drowning, if the body is picked up downriver some place. This is far enough. We'll fix him up now so his body if ever found can't ever be connected with me hereafter."

"How yuh get that me stuff?" the little one flared. "We're in fifty-fifty on this."

"Of course, of course," the big one said soothingly. "Only I'm to be Dr. Mark Hall from here on. That's what I meant, see."

"Okay then," the little man said, not fully mollified. "And I'm to be the boss of the Circle Eighty-one ranch, don't forget."

"Yes, of course. Here, let's get him ready before some train comes along."

They took off the unconscious victim's clothes. The little man went to a spot at the end of the bridge and brought out a bundle cached there—ragged old cowboy duds prepared in advance. The big man put these onto the victim with a dexterity that suggested his familiarity with the human body.

BACK on the books of a Baltimore medical college this man's name was Litt K. Barkman. He'd been kicked out of the school of medicine in his junior year for performing an illegal operation that would have tested the skill of any surgeon.

The little one was a squaw man who had lived for years with the Navajo Indians—until he killed his squaw and crippled baby down in New Mexico and went on the dodge last year. Up here in Montana he was going to risk coming out in the open under the name of Decker.

"All right, got him ready?" Decker asked.

"Good enough," Barkman replied, nervous in spite of himself. "All right, swing. Now—over!"

The unconscious form of Dr. Mark Hall went plunging into the turgid river twenty feet below. Litt Barkman hesitated a few seconds beside Decker, as if he thought of shoving his partner into the river after their victim.

No, not now. He might need a cold one like him before this thing was all over. Maybe not, though. If not, then it would have been better to get rid of the man now who thought he was going to be cut in on this three-hundred-thousand-dollar deal.

They went back to the station. Barkman found the traveling bag. With it, he walked boldly up to the station. The branch line locomotive was clanging its bell as if anxious for its hard run over through Little Bannock Pass.

Decker bought a ticket to Latigo, end of the branch line thirty-six miles away. Barkman had the ticket and baggage checks of Dr. Mark Hall. . . .

Doc splashed into the top of a green pine tree that floated in the rising river. The branches were soft and yielding enough to break his fall a little, but he went on into the water.

The tree, rolling in the flood, brought him back to the top. His weight steadied the branches in that position a moment. Then the tree took another roll and the body of the young doctor was carried beneath the water.

That new splash into the water jerked him back to consciousness. The first thing he realized was that he was fighting frantically in the water. Just threshing about, crazy fashion. And spewing out water.

Quickly he changed to orderly strokes of swimming. But the roll of the river was so powerful that he could make little headway across the current. His head ached until it made him sick all over. There was a louder roar just ahead. In the blackness of the night he could see nothing. But he knew he must be coming to rapids.

Down the rapids he shot, fighting with all his strength just to stay on top, not trying to make for the bank. If he only could ride out the rapids!

Something struck him. It was the pine tree again. He clutched at a limb and held on. Downward he went with the tree, rolling, plunging, clinging with one hand, trying to stay above the surface with the other. He was nearing exhaustion.

Then all at once the tree carried him into smoother water. It floated straight along, without rolling. How welcome the rest! He just held on and let the tree take him on down the river. It was then that he noticed the clothes he was wearing.

Not until now was he able to look back at what had happened to him, and try to figure out the cause of it. He had stepped off the train and talked to two men wanting a job. Another man and the little blond girl were hazy recollections. Then nothing more until he found himself in the angry river.

Why had they done it? Not robbery. You don't rob a man and change his clothes to rags before throwing him into the river. Then had they wanted narcotics? He hadn't been carrying his case at the time.

Inevitably, his reasoning set upon his business here in Montana. Seven years ago his bachelor uncle, oldtime cow country doctor whom everyone called Doctor Jim, had come down to Colorado and taken him off a horse and directed him toward the study of medicine. Even loaned him money when he couldn't possibly make enough in summer and spare time to get by. How strangely proud Doc had been when Doctor Jim started calling him Doc.

DOCTOR JIM had held on beyond a sensible time for retirement, because he'd planned always for his

nephew Mark to take over his practise. Doc had been due to arrive this month, June, to relieve the old doctor.

But Doctor Jim's heart went bad six weeks ago, and he hurried east to Johns Hopkins Hospital, where Doc was completing his internship. He died four days ago, and Doc was bringing the body home. Doc was the old doctor's only near relative, and he knew that he was inheriting not only Doctor Jim's practise, but his estate which was worth well over $300,000. Half of that estate was the Circle 81 ranch.

Young Dr. Mark reasoned that his present predicament must have something to do with his succession to Doctor Jim's fortune. Maybe those two crooks had a notion they could make way with a lot of Circle 81 cattle. This would have to be before anyone got wise to the fact that the heir designated in Doctor Jim's will was never going to show up.

Doc wondered what would happen at Latigo when he failed to arrive on the train with the body. Of course he meant to be there on the next train. But it was going to be a bad way to start off in Doctor Jim's boots. Especially when he'd never been to Latigo—was a total stranger to all of his uncle's friends and patients.

Doc drifted on, mile after mile. He was too numbed by the icy waters to abandon the tree and start swimming. It was still raining and dungeon dark. He had no idea which bank of the river might be the nearest. Or what kind of bank he'd have to land on by the time he reached shore.

CHAPTER II

Doctor Poison

EVERY mile Doc Mark Hall drifted was was giving his would-be murderers just that much more start on him, whatever they were about, he was sure of that. He'd have to try for the bank sooner or later. But every time he made up his mind to shove off from the pine, he just couldn't muster the strength.

It might mean drowning to hang onto the tree, but he was sure that if he abandoned it he'd never be able to fight the current to the bank. He tried to paddle the tree across the current, but in the rush of the water he couldn't tell whether he was making any headway or not. On and on he went, dreading what might happen and playing out his luck. Twice he was ducked into the water when the tree took a roll.

Then all at once the pine gave a violent heave. It's top, where Doc clung, lifted out of the water a little, then it fell back. But he suddenly realized that he was in willows. At last he had reached the bank!

Holding onto willows and piled-up driftwood, he staggered out of the water. And came to more water!

It took him ten minutes to accept the tough fact that he was on a tiny island in the river. No getting off tonight. But surely he'd be able to attract someone's attention come daylight. Or maybe swim to the mainland, when he felt stronger. If only this rain would let up!

The river was rising as one wretched hour passed after another. The water was crowding him into a smaller area all the time. He walked to stay halfway warm. His legs grew so weary they'd hardly drag. His head throbbed until it seemed it would split. He had a fever.

Dismal daylight revealed high bluffs on both sides of the river, which the island centered. Not a human sign up or down river. And certainly not enough strength left in him to attempt swimming that frothing stream. His fever was running higher, and his pulse more rapid. Hours had passed and not a bite to eat during all that time.

As he could summon strength to work, he began tugging pieces of driftwood from spots he could reach. Might get enough to build some sort of raft. But that would have to be done without hammer, nails or even bailing wire.

Today was set for his uncle's funeral. Of course the people at Latigo would give Doctor Jim a burial such as few men in Montana ever had had. But what would they be thinking of the nephew who didn't show up?

Another wretched night passed to be followed by a still more wretched day. He'd been able to tie a few logs together with willow withes, but he didn't feel equal to trying the river with it yet. The rain had let up, but the water hadn't had

time to go down.

By the third morning he knew he had a touch of pneumonia. He had to take a chance on the flimsy raft now, even if he was so weak he wouldn't be able to paddle much.

He lashed two more logs to his raft and pushed off from the island. For the first ten minutes he just let the river take him. No use wasting what strength he had against such a current. The sun came out warm. He just lay on the raft and let it drift.

Without intending to, he fell asleep. When he awoke, he knew he must be miles down the river. His raft was lodged among cottonwoods and willows, far out of reach of the river's main channel.

The water was up to his armpits, but he clung to trees and brush and waded out to a meadow. Far off in a cove was a little log ranchhouse, and smoke drifted lazily from a stone chimney. He started for the house. But he grew so weak in the first half mile that when he reached a barbed-wire fence he just leaned up against it and held on. Then he sank down slowly, completely out of his head.

Rancher Powling found him there hours later. Ned Powling, a deliberate old fellow behind three weeks' whiskers, studied the ragged unshaven stranger. Compassion finally moved him, and he went to his house for team and spring wagon.

"He's in bad shape," the rancher told his gray, thin little wife.

"While you fetch 'im up, I'll get a mustard plaster ready and fix up a hot toddy," she said "if you've left any of that whisky, Ned Powling."

THREE hours later the old couple stood beside the stranger's bed. Ned Powling shook his head.

"I hate to make that twenty-eight-mile ride," Powling said, "but this man has to have a doctor. You know, Ben Pole told us this mornin' that Doctor Jim's nephew was in Latigo to take Doctor Jim's place. I better go after him."

By drifting down the river Doc had come nearer to Latigo. The remote cow-town lay in Little Lonesome Valley across the mountains.

Litt Barkman, posing as Dr. Mark Hall, stood at his office door three miles out of Latigo, and looked at rancher Powling with displeasure. He was losing patience with all these cow country people who came for Dr. Hall.

"Well, what is it?" he asked.

"Doctor," Powling said, "I got a mighty sick man at my house. Can yuh come right off?"

"Where to?"

"At my place on the river, twenty-eight miles over the mountains."

"No, I can't come at all."

"But this man'll die inside of another day or so, unless you go doctor him."

"Who is he?"

"I dunno. He just staggered into my place yesterday, out of his head. Looked like he'd just been fished out of the river."

The fake doctor suddenly showed interest. "What does he look like?" he asked. "Didn't he say who he was?"

"He never talked. He is youngish, sort of. Dressed like a tramp, though he looks better than that kind. Had a knot on his head, like he might've been salivated and pitched into the river."

"All right, I'll go see him," the impostor said hastily, "Go over to the corral there and saddle me the best horse you can pick out, please."

While the rancher went to get the horse saddled, Litt Barkman hurried into the office of Doctor Jim. The old doctor had maintained his office at his ranch home, three miles out of Latigo. The shelves of the office were well stocked with drugs, and there was a small operating room for emergencies.

Barkman took up Doctor Jim's saddlebags and looked inside. He shook his head. Then he walked along the drug shelves until his eyes fell on the bottle he wanted. This he slipped into the saddlebags. His hands trembled.

To himself he thought, "This is one patient I'll sure take pleasure in visiting, even if it is a twenty-eight-mile ride."

It was after dark when the weary rancher and Barkman rode up to the Powling home. Mrs. Powling met them at the door. Litt Barkman betrayed a bad case of nerves with his first question.

"How is he—still unconscious?" he asked.

"He is now," Mrs. Powling answered. "Had a rational spell about an hour ago. I tried to cheer him up by telling him we'd sent for you, Dr. Hall. But he went out of

his head soon again and now just lies there, sometimes muttering."

"Let's see him," the fake doctor said, pushing toward the bedroom.

There he lay. Forehead wet. Face flushed, eyes closed. Never had there been a stranger bedside visit. An impostor called to save the life of the doctor whom the bogus doctor impersonated.

The bogus doctor felt the rapid pulse. Listened to the light congestion of the lungs. Took the temperature. Whistled his alarm.

"A hundred and five!" he lied. "He won't last long, unless I can reduce that fever. This new medicine may turn the trick, though."

Barkman's nervous fingers took from the saddlepockets the bottle they'd plucked from the drug shelf. He poured a heavy dose of the white powder into a cup that Mrs. Powling had half filled with water. If he could get only half that dose down him, this man would sleep his life away and the Powlings would tell that the unnamed stranger died of pneumonia.

WITH all the concern of an anxious doctor—but noticeably nervous—Barkman lifted Doc's head and put the cup to his lips.

All at once the supposedly unconscious man came to life. He pushed the cup away and looked at Barkman too straight to have just regained consciousness. Then from beneath his pillow the patient was snatching a six-shooter. Barkman sprang back from the bed, startled by the gun and the accusing eyes.

Doc had regained consciousness at the time Mrs. Powling described. He felt a good deal better and the congestion on his lungs was starting to break up. But when Mrs. Powling hastened to tell him that young Dr. Mark Hall had taken the place of Doctor Jim, it suddenly came to Doc what was behind his getting knocked in the head and thrown into the river.

The very audacity of the thing stunned the sick Doc for a time. But he held his tongue. He had a good idea what it all meant. He wasn't able to get up and go see about this usurpation of his name and inheritance. So, let the fake Dr. Hall come on—as Doc knew he surely would do. While Mrs. Powling was outside doing the ranch chores, Doc had slipped out of bed and found Powling's six-shooter that the rancher seldom ever carried. When she returned he pretended to be out of his head again.

"So you came to finish the job, huh?" he said to the fake doctor. "Well, it's all over, this little game. Tie this man up, Mr. Powling. I'm Dr. Mark Hall. This crook knocked me in the head and pitched me into the river, so he could take my place and get hold of Doctor Jim's estate."

The fake doctor looked at the gaping Powlings and shook his head. "Clean out of his head still," he said. "Or a crazy man to start with—I wouldn't know which."

Doc told the Powlings more of his strange story. But Barkman kept interrupting and contradicting. Barkman was smart. He was trying to wear Doc's strength down until he'd relapse into unconsciousness again. He also was attempting to confuse the old couple until they wouldn't know what was what concerning this weird drama breaking beneath their roof.

Litt Barkman was playing for tremendous stakes, and he saw that he had to deal the winning hand tonight or lose out entirely. Doc felt his strength slipping. He now saw through Barkman's plan.

"Listen, hombre," he said. "You interrupt me once more and I'll put a bullet through your coat close enough to bite a rib for you. Do it a second time and I'm liable to wing you heavy."

Again Barkman used that keen mind of his. He saw that Doc had grown desperate enough to do just what he said. But he read also the strength of the real Dr. Mark Hall.

"All right, my friend, you're out of your head and so you're excusable for all this," Barkman said slowly. "But one thing you won't do. You won't shoot a man in the back for no more than running when he's scared to death."

With that preparation, Barkman whirled about and raced for the door. He had only four jumps to make it.

"Stop, man, or I'll shoot!" Doc cried.

But Barkman was too near escape. Another bound and he was safe through the door. Doc sprang out of bed, to stop the man before he could race through the living room and out the front door. But when Doc hit on his legs, his knees gave way and he fell flat on his face.

CHAPTER III

Fugitive

BARKMAN with a horse under him, was of course off into the night. The Powlings caught Doc and helped him back into the bed. They were so ready to agree with all he said that he feared they half believed that he was out of his mind and irresponsible. But through the next two hours he convinced them, as he felt equal to talking, that he was the genuine Dr. Mark Hall.

"You've got a pretty wild story," Powling said frankly to Doc. "Nor do you look a bit like Doctor Jim."

"I take after my mother's people," Doc replied.

"Well," Powling said, "I'm satisfied now that yuh're the right man, Doctor Jim's nephew all right. But yuh've got a mighty uphill fight on, son. This bogus rascal came in on the train with Doctor Jim's body. Took the funeral mighty hard, they told me at the Circle Eighty-one. Then he plunged into settlin' the estate right off. Been visitin' the sick some, too, and not so bad. You got any proof that yuh're the right man. Proof that'll stand up in court?"

"I could fetch a hundred witnesses from Baltimore and my old home in Colorado. But I can't wait for that now. I've got to stop this devil before he cleans up the estate and disappears with all the money."

"Better hurry," Powling advised. "They told me that the day after the funeral this feller qualified as administrator, without bond the way the will read. The next day he sold Doctor Jim's stock in the Latigo bank, and they tell me he even drew out all Doctor Jim had in the bank—fourteen thousand dollars."

Doc whistled. "That's what we've got to stop first. Is he trying to sell the Circle Eighty-one?"

"Yes, and has a buyer on hand. Giving it away purt-nigh at a hundred thousand."

"I sure do have to hurry," Doc agreed.

He took his temperature with the thermometer which his impersonator had left behind, and found it to be only 102.4 even after all the excitement. His pulse wasn't alarmingly fast. With three normal days in bed, he could have hoped to be out safely.

"But I can't stay here," he told the Powlings. "This crook will turn heaven and high water to hold on till he's grabbed this estate. He'll go get help and come back to get rid of me some way, maybe even before daylight."

"But you're in no shape to travel," the woman protested. "You'd only take a bad set-back. Maybe die. You'll just have to stay in bed another day or so, and get some strength back. Prescribe your own medicine, and I'll feed you up."

Doc readily saw the wisdom of the woman's advice. But he couldn't risk staying in this house.

"Any old shack some place near, where you can make me a pallet?" he asked.

"No, but there's an old Indian cave back in the woods there half a mile."

Doc realized that he'd have to take to the cave for at least a day, maybe two or three, before he could risk that long ride into Latigo. Rancher Powling agreed to go in and report his plight to the sheriff and fetch back help. Also, to go to the probate judge and halt this fake heir until an investigation could be made.

Before midnight, Powling brought Doc some cowboy work clothes. Soon he put Doc on a horse and took him to the cave. Then the ranch couple brought Doc bedding, food and his uncle's saddlebags. There was enough grub to last three days in case they didn't dare risk going and coming from the hideout.

In the roof-smoked cave, Doc took a light dose of sleeping powders. That was the best way to snatch back the strength he must have. The sundown in the pine trees said about nine o'clock when he awoke. He felt much better. His temperature was down to 100.

It hurt a lot to lie there on his pine-branch bed and wait. But he felt sure that Mr. Powling would get the sheriff and probate judge on the case, and this fake doctor would be stopped in the right way —by the law.

BUT the second morning came and no Mr. Powling. No sheriff—no anybody. Doc grew more and more uneasy with every hour. He had improved a lot but he still felt that he shouldn't make the half-mile walk to the house, and risk get-

ting caught in the net that Barkman was sure to lay for him. Barkman was going to go to any length to prevent Doc from getting out and denouncing him.

By four o'clock Doc couldn't stand it any longer. He got up and began the slow walk to the Powling ranchhouse. But out in sight of the house he stopped.

There were several men about the place. Their movements bespoke some grave event. Doc eased over into a bunch of squaw bushes and watched. They were carrying a body from the house. They put it into a spring wagon and two women covered it with a blanket.

Fear deepened in Doc. He had to know what this meant. He slipped back into the pines and made his way slowly over to the rough wagon road over which the spring wagon had to pass. Near a gate he hid himself beneath the low-hanging branches of an Englemann spruce.

There came the slow procession. Spring wagon and half a dozen men riding horseback behind it. They came up to the gate and a man got off his horse to open it.

Doc heard a man speak, "Poor woman. Never was a kinder-hearted soul. They just didn't come any better than her and old Ned, a bit queer though he was."

It had to be Mrs. Powling under the blanket. The dark suspicion settled deeper over Doc. She'd been murdered to prevent her from telling the story she knew. Rancher Powling also probably had been waylaid and killed before he could get into town.

"I've never seen a crazy man," Doc heard another man remark.

"Look where that leaves me," Doc thought.

He was thinking of two things. His impersonator would murder him on sight. Also, the man doubtless had already laid the murders on him and proclaimed him to be a crazy man. By labeling him as insane, the man taking his place could hope to nullify any talk that Doc might make if he got to other people before he was put out of the way for good.

Doc wanted to spring up from his hiding place then and there and denounce the whole terrible scheme. But he couldn't make himself do it. These neighbors of the Powlings were in an ugly mood. They might even lynch him. At best, all Doc could have expected was to have been treated like a crazy man until the fake doctor could find some new means of disposing of him.

So Doc waited there under the spruce, and let the procession pass on. More mutterings of the passing men convinced him that Mr. Powling also had been found dead. He'd never reached town.

Doc stole back to his cave. Now indeed he was alone. He was pitted against a very cunning and a very desperate man. He'd have to have one more night's rest before he could go out and start his uphill fight.

It looked as if it was going to be a very complicated fight. First, to stay alive until he could get a chance to talk. Next, to convince people that he was Dr. Mark Hall. And finally to fasten these murders on the bogus doctor.

But he wouldn't stay in the cave. They'd be scouring the country for this supposed crazy man, and someone might think of the cave or follow the sign to the shelter. Doc went back to the cave, gathered up what he could carry and went off through the pine woods until he found a big old spruce, the lower limbs of which swept the earth in their abundance. There he slept back more vigor for his trip that must begin at daylight.

HE WAS on his way long before daylight. He didn't take a chance on the Powling ranchhouse, because he feared they'd have men there watching for him. But he had to have a horse. If men were lying in wait for him in the house, they'd hide their horses somewhere in the strip of pine that tongued down near the stable. Doc stole down through this strip.

Right guess. His thin keen nostrils picked up the smell of horses just inside the pines. He was within ten feet of two tethered mounts. Both saddled, too. He slipped up to the nearest, talking to it in a low voice so the horse wouldn't "booger" at him.

But they'd outsmarted him. He heard a voice close behind him.

"Up with 'em!" came the gruff command. "We got you!"

Doc had never been shot through and through with such fear as hit him now. He knew this would mean his death if he surrendered. The voice hardly had finished before there lashed through his

mind the thought, "Get out of here!"

Just that. Escape. The fastest way and the only way he could escape strong men was to ride for it. As if by instinct, he whipped his body down and leaped for the nearest horse. As he knew they would, two six-shooters spewed out yellow flame at him. But his downward whip saved him from the first volley.

The horse lunged sideward, frightened by the guns. It threw itself so hard against its tether that the rope snapped. But Doc was seizing the horn by that time and leaping for the saddle. Realizing that it was loose, the animal bounded away. Doc clung onto the horn and cantle with frantic strength and flung leg across leather.

Again the guns were burning yellow flames toward him. But the ambushers were shooting in the dark now, wildly. Doc slapped his horse hard on the neck and forced it to swerve fast.

CHAPTER IV

Tough Spot

DOC rode on. Even though it was dark, his escape seemed little less than a miracle. But he deserved a break somewhere along the line, and he hoped this was it. He made it out of there and crashed on through the brush. Behind him he heard a rider take to the other horse. Both men were shouting to the house. That meant other men had been waiting for him there.

Now Doc had but one hard try to make —if he could outride pursuers long enough. In his predicament, he decided, he had better head fast for town and give himself up to the sheriff. Then he could remain safe in jail while he started procedure to establish his identity in order to convince people that this impostor was the man who'd killed the Powlings or had it done.

He didn't even know the way to Latigo. But he hit for the wagon road, believing that he could stay with it and find his way until clear daylight. He still was cowboy enough to know, however, that over a mountainous road like this there might be shortcuts which riders familiar with the road could take on him.

Who were these riders behind him anyway? He could hear them coming behind him, two or three fogging it hard. He reasoned that the fake doctor wouldn't have appealed to the sheriff or even to local ranchers. No, he'd get tough men who'd take orders and keep their mouths shut. Doc didn't believe, though, that in a small cow country place like Latigo many ruthless men could have been found on short notice.

Some of the impostor's men might not be so bad, therefore, if they only could be convinced that they were working for a crook who was taking a desperate gamble for a fortune. Doc, however, couldn't take a chance on any such possibilities concerning the men after him.

But what a ride it was! Five men pursuing him now, as daylight dawned. Then the sun started climbing. And four of the five men not five hundred yards behind him. Either the fifth had dropped out of the chase, or had gone for help.

Doc saw now that one of the four pushing up hard after him was his chief enemy, the bogus doctor. The man therefore had played his hand to catch Doc at the Powling house, and so take the least chance of letting him reach town to tell his story.

Right now the man was staking everything on overtaking Doc. They were crowding their horses hard, and gaining. Dipping into a coulee, Doc loosened his saddle and let it fall off, to lighten his horse's load thirty pounds. It would make a big difference, maybe, in spite of how hard this bareback riding was.

Mile upon mile. A fresh horse at the first ranch. And a Winchester that he had to snatch from the hands of a protesting ranch woman—another strike against him if he got caught. He was able to stay out ahead now, until his pursuers swerved from the road, disappeared and then came on again on fresh mounts.

At last he was within sight of the Circle 81 ranch. He knew it because a telephone line came out to Doctor Jim's place and was the only line on this side of town. Doc risked burning his horse out to reach the ranchhouse well ahead of the quartet pushing him. If only he could get inside, barricade himself and 'phone to the sheriff.

Two riders loomed in the road ahead of him, both riding for the house. Doc saw quickly that it was the beautiful little

blond girl and her father who'd got off the train with him at the Junction. The father seemed very much concerned about his eight year-old daughter.

"Better keep out of the house with her," Doc called ahead. "It looks like a gunfight there."

The man turned off the trail to let him pass. Doc determined to make use of this man to spread his story, if it wasn't too late already.

"I'm the real Dr. Mark Hall," he called to the man. "The other man is a fake. Please hurry to town and tell the sheriff."

"All right, all right," the man returned.

The man's words had a tone that said he wasn't believing Doc at all. Doc realized all the more what a fix he was in.

THE little girl was bent over, holding her side. Doc saw she'd been crying. Instantly, his medical mind put two and two together. On a trotting horse. Appendicitis! He forgot his own peril momentarily.

"Get that child out to a hospital," Doc called. "She's liable to have a bad attack any hour."

The man just stared at him, then looked around at his little girl. Doc was to learn soon that this man was Alex Longstreet. He'd just bought the Circle 81 ranch at a rare bargain figure of $100,000. Paid every dollar in cash, too, at the insistence of the supposed heir. Longstreet had started out on an errand, the little girl with him, when she complained of her side and started vomiting.

Doc could lose no more time with the man and child. He passed them and pushed hard for the yard gate of the big house. Suddenly four men stepped out onto the porch, each with a gun. Stunned, Doc whirled his horse.

They had him cut off from town. And on came the four pursuers. Cornered, Doc flitted his glance to what very clearly was an icehouse down by the big creek. There'd probably be a foot of sawdust insulating the walls—good bullet-stopper.

Doc spurred his horse hard for the icehouse. He sailed through the door at the very instant bullets slapped into the wall. The icehouse was about half full of ice—more protection against getting smoked out.

The man and the little girl hurried on into the big house, the child crying now with pain.

For an hour Doc stood them off. A dozen men now. Somehow the impostor had kept word of the siege from getting spread in town. He wanted to end this thing his own way—and fast. They weren't pouring useless bullets into Doc's little ice fort. Just an occasional sniping shot when he showed his head to stand somebody off.

Every few minutes Doc was distressed by hearing the little girl's scream from the big house. Then she'd go to crying afresh. Sometimes she was violently retching.

The siege wore along another ten minutes. The little girl's screams became terrifying. Doc was moved to deep pity for her. Sure a sweet little thing. But he could do nothing for her. Not much more for himself. Unless help did come out from town. But he had almost no hope there. This fake doctor would keep everybody misled so they'd join the mob rather than come to Doc's aid.

Then there was an odd turn. Alex Longstreet broke out of the house and ran straight for Doc's fort.

"Don't shoot me!" he shouted as he came. "It's my little girl I want to talk about."

Doc heard Barkman's angry voice shouting, "Stay back, you fool! This is a crazy fiend we've got penned up there!"

"You won't or can't do anything for Virginia," Longstreet shouted back to Barkman. "I'm taking a long gamble."

"Come back here or I'll kill you!" Barkman shouted.

Longstreet was a courageous man. "You don't dare shoot me and you know it!" he said.

That was the way the thing stacked up, too. Longstreet came up to within twenty feet of Doc and stopped.

"My little girl is in convulsions," he panted to Doc. "This man who claims to be a doctor only makes her worse. You say you're Dr. Mark Hall. All right, come prove it. Let me see you take charge of my child. I'll know mighty quick if you're a doctor."

Doc shook his head. "They'd never let me come back alive," he said.

Longstreet turned toward the house. "Hey, you," he called. "I beg you to let this man come up and see my child."

To Doc's amazement he heard the im-

postor say, "Well, it's agreeable to me—if you want to put your child in the hands of a crazy man. And this man will have to come up unarmed."

Doc saw through it. His impersonator never intended to let him get out of the house alive. He couldn't even afford to let Doc show by his skill that he was Dr. Hall. That would put the impostor himself on the spot. The schemer therefore meant to do away with Doc before he ever touched the little girl. He'd contrive some excuse to kill him, to make it look like justifiable homicide.

AGAIN Doc shook his head. There would be no such trap for him.

Longstreet went back to the house. The screams of his Virginia came again, now even more terrifying. Then came even more violent retching. Doc's heart was stirred. But it was the same as signing his own life away to go up there.

Longstreet came back and begged Doc. He said, "This other man claims nothing but an operation will help Virginia, and he doesn't operate." Longstreet said.

Of course Litt Barkman, with over two years medical training, wouldn't attempt a major operation like this under any such circumstances. And the suffering child was his bait.

Ten minutes more. Longstreet was close up at the icehouse door, begging Doc to come.

"I'm believing you're the real doctor," he whispered, "because on the train you told Virginia you were a doctor, she says."

Doc remembered that he had told the little girl that he was a doctor as she talked about the hospital.

"I'll stand by and protect you with a gun," Longstreet promised, "if you'll only come."

"That devil up there won't let you pick up a gun to protect me," Doc said. "I'm sorry, Mr. Longstreet—mighty sorry."

Longstreet kept on pleading. Doc longed to go save the child, but he'd only walk into his enemy's trap and do the girl no good.

"Dr. Hall, I don't believe that even tough men will stand by and see my little girl die for want of a doctor," Longstreet said finally, "I'm going to talk to them."

Longstreet ran back to the house. Men were on the porch, in the yard. Their attitudes said that they all hoped for relief for the child. Even Litt Barkman made a show of anxiety.

Longstreet halted in the yard. "Listen, men," he implored, "this man down in the icehouse claims to be the real Dr. Hall."

"As if I wasn't!" the fake doctor sneered.

"Pay no attention to this man," Longstreet urged. "Let the man in the icehouse prove what he is—if he can, and I think he can. Men, clear out of the house. Let him come and operate without giving up his own life."

Longstreet was touching the men with his pathetic appeal. Barkman readily saw this. Of course he'd have to put a crimp in that.

"That's enough of such talk," Barkman said. "You men keep that crazy bird penned up in the icehouse and I'll operate. I'll prove once and for all that I am Dr. Mark Hall."

Doc didn't hear much of that talk. But when Longstreet came back and told him that the other man was going to operate, Doc was aghast. Of course he still didn't know that this man had had over two years in a medical college, enough for him to make a professional show to laymen.

If the man did prove to be a renegade doctor with skill enough to perform this operation, all well and good. If not, he'd murder that child to establish himself here long enough to grab off the cream of this estate. If she died, he'd only say that no doctor could have saved her.

Virginia's long scream came again, followed by more retching. Doc couldn't stand it any longer. Regardless of what happened to him, he had to go up there.

Barkman had stipulated that if he came he must come unarmed. But Doc kept his holstered gun—just one last bond between him and life, if it came down to that kind of a stand.

He stepped out of the icehouse and started up the slope to Doctor Jim's house. A queer feeling came over him. He was in sight of them. From this second on, his life would hang by a thread. This impostor might not even let him live to make his appeal to the men waiting up there.

Like Longstreet, though, Doc didn't believe that these men whom this impostor had hired hastily, would stand by and see

a child's life sacrificed to one man's greed. The majority of the men whom the impostor had brought here must have some decency left in them, whatever else they lacked.

"Hey, men," Doc shouted up to those men, "I'm coming to see that the little girl gets real mercy—and a chance to live. The bogus doctor there will kill her just to go on with his grab at Doctor Jim's fortune. Let him start the operation if he's a doctor. Some of you stand by and judge. So will I and I'll finish it if he bungles—if you protect me just for that operation."

CHAPTER V

Mercy Mission

FAIR enough an appeal to any set of tough men. But they hesitated, looked at each other. Then the little humpbacked squaw man who called himself Decker said, "All right, jasper. Come on up. We'll protect you."

Doc recognized his high-pitched voice as that of the second man who met him at the train. The man's promise meant treachery. But Doc would risk dealing with the two of them, if he could win some of the others over through the operation. Evidently, the impostor was going to rely on his own wits after he got Doc up there in his power.

"Maybe he is a doctor—some ornery cuss who's lost his professional standing," Doc heard Barkman say. "More likely, he is just plain crazy. But if he can operate—I don't claim to be too good—let him do it and I'll check on him as he goes along."

That sure was passing the buck, but Doc accepted the precarious arrangements. He started on for the house. Some men glowered at him awhile, others looked at him with something closely akin to admiration. Only a crazy man or a very staunch one would come out of the temporary safety of the icehouse, for this.

What a strange arrival, the new Dr. Hall to take over the office of Doctor Jim. A dozen determined men were watching him. Some had murder in their hearts and eyes. More of them honestly believed that they had a madman cornered or a queer mystery to unravel.

"Boys, I want you to stand at windows and doors and watch," Doc said. "Guns in your hands, too. If I fail to prove myself, cut me down if that's what you want. But if I save Virginia, then what happens to me will be up to you boys from there on."

Doc marched up to the side entrance into the office. Only then did Barkman betray his intentions. At the door he stopped would-be witnesses to the operation.

"You know," he said, "that this critical operation can't be performed with a gang of men around, with all sorts of chances of infecting the child's incision. Only I and Mr. Decker and a couple more will put on aprons and go inside to watch."

Score twice for Mr. Barkman! He made himself sound professional and he was laying the ground for Doc's murder inside the operating room.

Quickly, Barkman nodded to two more men of his choosing. "You, Zaner—and you, Reece. You two are men the rest can trust. Come on in and watch."

Zaner and Reese were strangers to the community. But one look at their faces said that they were the very kind whom a crook would hire to stand by him through a dirty stretch.

"No, boys, I don't walk into any death trap like that," Doc exclaimed. "I'll hand you out a white sheet. Tear it up and make masks for your mouths and noses. Then watch from doors and windows."

Barkman balked flatly at that. But Doc appealed to the half dozen men who were siding with Longstreet more than with him or Barkman.

"See that I get to operate, boys," Doc pleaded.

"We'll see that you do," Longstreet promised.

Barkman couldn't very well hold out against that decision. He'd have to make another try, once Doc got tied up in the operation. Doc now went into the bedroom where the child was tossing in agony. The impostor hadn't even given her a shot of morphine. Maybe he wanted to let her suffer, to lure Doc out to his death.

Quickly Doc relieved the pain with morphine. Then blood count—and decision. Appendicitis, yes. He feared that the appendix had broken already. Noth-

ing but an immediate operation could save Virginia's life. He took her into his arms and carried her into Doctor Jim's emergency operating room.

He himself gave her the ether, talking to the child like a pal. Sometimes laughing. Trying to take away her terror of this thing until she went under. But through it all there was a dreadful fear in his own heart. No doctor had ever begun an operation under more perilous circumstances.

Hardly had the keen blade laid open the flesh when Doc felt himself turn sick. He'd gone beyond his strength. His hand started to shake. Sweat beaded out on his forehead.

"You can't go to pieces," he said to himself. "Forget yourself. Save this child's life. That's all. Do this job right, if it's the very last thing on earth you ever get done."

HE STEADIED himself and worked on. His fingers fell back into the skill that had marked him for a surgeon his last year in medical college. Too bad! He found that the appendix had ruptured. That cut the girl's chances down a lot more.

A dozen pair of eyes watched in the room—from windows and doors. They were fascinated eyes—some roving from Doc's face and skilled hands to the face of Barkman and Decker. For Doc it was a terrible ordeal. No assistant, and all the cards stacked against him.

But now and then he flashed glances at the eyes above improvised masks at doors and windows. He was appealing to them—trying to read their verdict. He began to feel it, more than see it in their eyes. He was winning some of these men over slowly and precariously. But they weren't doubting him so much now.

It seemed like hours and hours that he worked. But at last he was suturing the incision, applying the bandage.

"Doctor, will she live?" Longstreet asked hoarsely, from a window.

"Yes, if luck's with us—and peritonitis doesn't set in." But to himself Doc was thinking, "But can I live? Will they let me get out of here alive—to prove that they are crooks and frauds?" And the answer came back, "Certainly, not. They're going to risk everything on some trick. Watch every move and be ready."

He was still telling himself that when Longstreet came into the room and carried Virginia to a bed in another room. Barkman was trying to disarm Doc with flattery.

"I never saw a slicker job, doctor," he said. "Where did you practise?" Then Barkman walked over to a window and said to the laymen, "No question about it, he's a doctor from somewhere, but I still say he's off in the upper story."

It was Longstreet himself who precipitated the crisis ahead of whatever scheme Barkman had for Doc's undoing. He came back into the door, and he had a six-shooter whipping up.

"You're the fake," he hurled at Barkman. "You've sold me a ranch you never owned—cleaned me out of all I had and all I could borrow."

"Put that gun down, you fool!" Barkman snapped. "Your kid's alive. Isn't that enough? And you've got your ranch, haven't you?"

Another man suddenly spoke in heavy voice from the window. "Let Longstreet talk," he said. "We want to look into this plumb satisfactory. You sold me some cattle, hombre. If yuh've rooked me, yuh better start a-prayin'—now!"

Barkman flashed his eyes to doors and windows. He read quick hostility flaring up against him all around. All at once Barkman and his three trusted men found themselves ringed by hard looks.

Doc took speedy advantage of the break. "You're through, you four," he said. "Give up and then try to talk your way out."

"I'm still in charge here," Barkman said loudly. "You men can't side with a crazy doctor and browbeat me. Come on, boys, let's go on about our business."

Barkman started for the door. He knew he was caught in the very trap he'd set for Doc. Now he was trying to bluff his way out. After that, he'd have to start all over again.

But the heavy-voiced rancher at the door said, "Lift your biscuit hooks, you four. We'll take charge here till things are looked into right."

The man jabbed a gun toward Barkman. Longstreet also had a gun on him. Barkman was lost if he surrendered. His fear-glazed eyes whipped onto Doc. Hated him with all the ferocity of a cornered

wild beast.

Doc was between Barkman and the inner door. If the cornered quartet made a dash into the interior of the big house, they'd still have a chance for a getaway.

"You can't go this way," Doc denied the thought. "Hike your hands, boys. It's all over."

"Not yet," Barkman cried.

THEN he suddenly made the fatal break. In his predicament it still was his best bet. Four desperate men might shoot their way past a few less desperate cowboys and ranchers. So far it was only Doc, Longstreet and Meadows, the rancher of the heavy voice with Circle 81 cattle on his hands. Barkman grabbed for his gun. And he was leaping toward Doc, making for the door.

Doc also went for his six-shooter. He was desperately fast, with all the skill he'd built up as a boy in his teens learning to shoot from the hip. His gun holster had no pivot. He had to lurch his body sideward, flash his hip in motion with the pivoting of the gun and holster—and all in one cat-fast motion.

Then his Colt rocked in his hand. He knew he got Barkman with that first lightning shot. Flush in the chest. No time for a more deadly aim. In one second it was a mad room of blazing guns, men's cries, and leaping feet.

Impossible as it seemed, Zaner and Decker did make their way into the hall, rush upstairs, break out onto a porch roof and leap to the yard. Both made for horses hitched out back. Zaner got completely away.

Decker was wounded and surrendered. With the threat of a noose, it didn't take him long to tell where Barkman had buried all the money he'd taken out of the estate so far.

Back in the operating room, Doc lay on the floor. He'd whipped himself downward after he got Barkman, just in time to escape the wild crisscross of lead. But he hadn't escaped altogether. He had a painful furrow off his left ribs and a bloodied spot on his thigh. But nothing that a few days in bed wouldn't fix up all right.

Men gathered around him. Silent fellows mostly, ashamed of their stand against him so short a time before. Then Alex Longstreet came in. He squatted by Doc and seized his hand. Tears were in his eyes.

"Doctor," he exclaimed, "you've saved yore fortune. Saved my little girl's life, too. But most of all, you've proved yoreself a man fit to take Doctor Jim's place."

Doc smiled up at the warming faces above him. "Boys," he said, "that's all I ask. Just to fill Doctor Jim's boots."

COMING IN THE NEXT ISSUE

SALT OF THE EARTH

A Colorful Action Novelet

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

PLUS MANY OTHER QUICK-TRIGGER STORIES!

"I hit him as he shot, and his gun shore roared!"

SKIM FACES THE MUSIC

By RAYMOND S. SPEARS

Sheriff Lon Carday of Plenty Wood Court and young Skim Rasson join forces in a rip-roaring battle for justice!

SHERIFF LON CARDAY, who had ridden to the Circle Triangle from Plenty Wood Court that morning, and Kipp Logan, owner of the spread, were heatedly arguing a subject on which they had been at loggerheads for some time.

"Now, Sheriff," Logan declared for the dozenth time, "I'm tellin' yuh the son of that nester, Bob Rasson, is a plumb nuisance! Why, cuss him, he's liable to catch a calf in one of them wolf traps he's runnin'!"

"Yuh'd rather have wolves runnin' around loose than lose a six-bit calf, Logan?" the sheriff inquired.

"Yuh got to stop that feller's trespassin' on my pasture or I will!" the irate rancher said belligerently. He added meaningly, "Unless, of course, yuh'd rather have Rasson's vote than my outfit's."

"I understand the nester is dependin' on his boy's fur take for what they're eatin', since Bob come so near to gettin' killed when he was bushwhacked," the lawman commented.

"Well, why in thunderation is he nestin' out there practically in my pasture, anyhow?" Logan interrupted. "He's even took a claim on some of my headwaters! I ain't arguin', Carday. I'm tellin' yuh—personally and politically."

"I'll see what I can do, Logan," the sheriff promised. "I know that boy. He's comin' twenty. I wouldn't crowd him—not after somebody shootin' his dad in the back. 'Course he's small for his age, and don't look twenty, but he'll grow."

The owner of the Circle Triangle started to interrupt again, but on second thought, he did not. He was thinking that Sheriff Lon Carday could speak gently, and yet say a whole lot in a few words.

Logan, tall, thin, with a triangular face and sunken eyes, compressed his twitchy lips. He was remembering that he was an important man. He had thrown his support to Carday against several candidates—which the lawman should remember.

Carday was grateful, but he had investigated the shooting of the nester, Bob Rasson, and didn't like the looks of it. Badly wounded, the nester had zigzagged his horse, escaping several bullets. Carday had found the shells from a Winchester .45-90 which had been left by the would-be killer. The only reason Rasson had not been killed was that his horse had heard the click when the big rifle was cocked, and had jumped sideward. Otherwise, the bullet would have severed Rasson's back bone.

When Sheriff Carday left the Circle Triangle and rode to the nester's home, he was thinking of what he knew about Bob Rasson and his family. Rasson had come in with his wife and son, had taken a full Bad Land section, and they had lived as nesters commonly did, killing venison to eat, shooting wolves for bounty, trapping fur for money during the long winter months.

Rasson had some cows, good big beefs, small-bone stuff. He had two prime bulls with badly obscured brands. He had brought the stock with him. His son had driven a big wagon and five horses, and Mrs. Rasson had helped herd the cows and several good saddle horses up the trail.

ORDINARILY, Kipp Logan would have welcomed a wolver, but this nester was more than a mere trapper. He had cattle, horses and ability. In three years Rasson had an outfit. He had taken a lease on twice as much Government land per head of beef and horses as Logan had.

Logan's range was overgrazed and Rasson's, with twenty acres to a head, was producing not only well-bred beefs, but beefs in far better condition than those on the Circle Triangle. Then Rasson had been shot at and wounded, but he had not left the country.

Logan was a hard, driving, stupid man, the sheriff considered. Hardly able to read, let alone write, he called Government scientists fools, stupid—just book ranchers, "scienterific," and not practical. Logan bragged he had not been to school himself since he was nine, and that he had been a "blamed good cowman" when he was fifteen.

Logan had spread wide, looking for grass when his own had been gnawed down to the roots. But he was regarded as a five-thousand-head cowman, regardless of the fact that this was twenty-five hundred more cows than a sensible, educated rancher would have had on his spread.

Sheriff Carday cut across country along the east side of Rasson's outfit, and there he saw a young fellow driving Circle Triangle cows off the Rasson land back into their own denuded bunch grass mounds. The cows were "rolling fat"—every rib showed and their hip bones stuck up. Logan always sold his best animals, and bred his canner stock down.

"Howdy!" the sheriff greeted the youth, whose expression was serious. "Reckon yuh're Skim Rasson?"

"Yes, Sheriff Carday."

"Looks like the Circle Triangle cows have been driftin'," commented the lawman.

"We've been turnin' 'em back for two years," "Skim" Rasson said.

" 'Course, they're hungry. And you got good grass."

Skim nodded.

"Some fair half-breeds there, Skim."

Sheriff Carday remarked. "They ain't so bony. That bull never bred 'em."

Young Rasson pinched his lips together, checking whatever retort had almost sprung to his lips. He looked over his shoulder to where the Rasson animals, the Box A Tailed, were feeding toward spring water some distance off.

"Listen, boy, I've heard talk," Carday met that silence.

"Dad and I found two of our bulls clear against the brush, Sheriff Carday," Skim Rasson said. "Not a scratch on 'em. And not a Logan bull anywheres around."

"Who shot yore father?" the sheriff snapped.

"We don't know. He told yuh all he knew when yuh come out before." Skim looked away. "He—he couldn't make certain."

"Tell me, what have yuh learned since?" the sheriff demanded.

The young fellow shook his head, and flushed. Then he faded grayish, his jaws set and showed the bones from near his ears to his chin.

"Yuh looked close at the shoe tracks, Skim," the sheriff reminded, "when yuh took the posse to the scene of the shooting. Yuh know yuh can't take personal revenge. We're bringing the law into this country. A man was shot, wounded, near killed. If yuh got any information about it, it ain't legal to hold it back from me."

"Sheriff Carday, I'm not a full-grown man yet." Skim lifted his hands in a sudden gesture. "How far would my word go in court? My father's a nester. I'm just a nestin' outfit kid. Our family's got one vote. Folks say a nester'll steal, maverick, rustle. But I'm tellin' yuh, Sheriff, the only cows wearin' the Circle Triangle brand that we'd take as a gift was bred from our own bulls."

The sheriff changed the subject.

"I understand yuh're trappin', Skim."

"We make half our livin' from stock," the youth said. "The other half comes from good shootin', clean steel, and wild-life know-what."

"I've come out quite aways, Skim," Sheriff Carday said. "It's gettin' on towards night. Reckon yuh got a feed for my hoss and me?"

"Why, Sheriff, we're common folks, but we'd be proud, havin' yuh set at our table, sleep in our blankets!" Skim was beaming. "We're legal, Sheriff! We mind our own business. But trappers, nesters—'course they can't hold their heads up. We don't blame anybody for suspectin' us. Anything yuh want to know about us, yuh got the truth comin'—and my dad always said for me to talk like I'm under oath in a Government court. I tell yuh, my dad's honorable! We may be trappin' nesters, not much account, but we despise anybody who bushwhacks."

"When the time comes, if it does, yuh'll come over to Plenty Wood Court, and tell exactly what's what, Skim?" asked the sheriff.

SKIM looked around at the roughs. He looked for a long time toward the distant mountain range. He swallowed—again and again. The sheriff, riding along toward the nester's home, waited patiently. After a time he said to the quiet lad:

"When the Government knows just what happened, most of us aim to balance things up, make things right. If a man does wrong, commits a crime, even if he's ignorant the best way is to face the music. The common good is served, even if somebody has to go to jail. Many a man spends his life runnin', hidin' out, when two-three years in jail would free him all the rest of his time. Many a man in prison is better off payin' the penalty he owes than messin' around outside, always afraid, never able to settle down, hungry, bitter, hopeless—growin' meaner every day."

" 'Course, I know what it means, hidin' out," Skim said. "I was just wonderin'. The way things are, I don't know if I could keep a promise to come in, Sheriff. A man might know somethin' he couldn't tell. If I do come in, I won't lie. I'll tell all I know. I've never begun lyin'. If I come in, I'll tell the truth."

"Prob'ly yuh won't have to come in—or hide out," Sheriff Carday declared. "Whoever shot yore father didn't come in. When bushwhackers have done meanness, they're always afraid. They wouldn't shoot a man in the back in the first place, if they wasn't cowards. Take a good man, Skim, and even if he is afraid, he faces the music. Yuh know, Skim, I never made up my mind about yore dad till I was called out to hunt for the man who shot him."

They rode down a long grade to the corral and the cabins. There were three of

them—one for living, one for storing, and a third in which the family had first lived, but had outgrown.

When Mrs. Rasson saw the sheriff she twisted her apron in her hands, her eyes tragic.

"I just come out to look around," Carday explained, "A cattleman hates to have big traps set across his pasture. One of them Number Five wolf traps, or the Number Four Jumpin' Kangaroos, could hurt a calf's leg, prob'ly break it. A cow, colt, hoss—any animal gets hurt in a trap. It's hard to set steel jaws so's a dog can't get into it, too."

"I've set all my traps back in the Bad Lands," Skim said. "I use blind sets where lobos come through narrow brush. I set coyote traps over bluff banks, usually, so's they reach down for bait—and get caught in traps on a bench where no stock'd ever step down. Mink and otter traps are in water—I use snares in their burrows under water. Same for muskrats. Badgers—I always think about stock . . ."

"I reckon yuh go where the wolves are to get 'em?" Carday asked.

"Wolves swing wide. They run in big circles, same as otter and mink. The three wolves I collected bounty on I got back on the roughs when they come off the pastures. You told me yuh heard 'em goin' by Plenty Wood Court. I knowed their tracks—seven of 'em. I knowed which way they'd come from over on their runway. I set traps where they jumped down about six foot off a bluff. Three landed in the traps. The others threw 'emselves into the clear. They ain't been through here since."

"Four wolves killed five calves and two colts up by Windrow Sands, the paper said," the sheriff commented.

"They've shoved their runway ten-twelve miles over, givin' me the go-by," Skim said. "But the Flower-Stem outfit told me I was welcome there any time. Mr. Wingdom said he was glad to have a wolver working. . . . Say, I'd like to show yuh my sets—all the steel, the snares, spots and line."

"I'd like to see a few," the sheriff said, carefully. "I used to trap when I was a boy. Jump traps were new them days. Made a lot of difference in the weight."

So they all talked wildcrafting. They talked cows, pasture, horses, and got around to politics, religion and crimes, to bad actors going through, hiving up in the daytime.

Skim showed the sheriff every kind of set he used. Not one had been laid down carelessly. Even a dog would have had to dig and reach to get into badger sets, swim to get to otter traps, and leave home to find wolf runway blind sets.

"Yuh've got a right to trap, Skim," Sheriff Carday declared. "Yuh get good money for yore furs, tradin' in the stores."

Sheriff Carday rode homeward again across country. The trail would have taken him past the Logan outfit. He didn't want to see Logan, for he knew how futile it was to try to argue with that hard, greedy rancher, who was commonly supposed to hold the balance of power in the county, able to elect or defeat a candidate. He even claimed to have put Carday into office, which was not true. Logan's entire influence, in fact, had been used to put another fellow out of office.

Carday shook his head and shrugged, as he turned his head to look in all directions. Here was a whole region where there had been bushwhacking, other killings, in order to hold a range where it cost more to raise big herds of cattle than ever were paid for them, beef, hides, or swap.

"All a sheriff can do is wait around for what else is to happen" the lawman told himself. "The makin' of a bad one is in that boy, Skim, I'm afraid. He tells as much as he thinks is necessary. He knows a sight more'n he claims. He don't favor havin' his dad bushwhacked, and I'll bet he never quit lookin' till he knew whose hoss had been tied up that draw, while somebody waited for the nester to come along."

SHERIFF CARDAY slipped back into Plenty Wood Court after dark. He put his horse into the barn, fed it, rubbed it down while he worriedly tried to figure some way of bringing peace to the range where there had always been too many cows for the grass. Didn't they realize that two half-starved cows would bring only forty-five dollars, where one fat one would bring thirty?

In the Milk Pail Lunch, three riders who were in town to spend some money were talking when the sheriff entered. He

listened to them. The country was getting too crowded, one of them was complaining. Homesteaders had moved in with Government claim papers. They would hang on just long enough to build some fences, plow some land, ruin pastures, said another, while a third rider declared that it stood to reason the country wasn't good for anything but big ranches. Something should be done about the invaders.

Another thing, one of the Triangle Circle riders said—that nester, Bob Rasson, who got shot up wasn't using half his grass, because he was too poor to fill up his land with cows. The trouble was that this nester was trying to act too big and was interfering with a big outfit.

"Why, I got it straight that Bob Rasson's family would starve to death if that young Rasson didn't get wolf bounty and fur money!" one cowboy said. "All the meat anybody gets, stoppin' by there, they say, is venison, jackrabbit, prairie chickens—stuff like that! They don't have salt pork or bacon but two-three times a year!"

Sheriff Carday ate slowly. When the cowboys tinkled and flapped on their way, he sipped his coffee, swallowed his beef and fried potatoes as if he didn't taste them. The trouble was, he thought, homesteaders would starve to death if they had to, but they would cut up the big range into fenced fields that a jackrabbit would have to go around, getting out of the dust he kicked up.

In all the county, though, the only man handling cows who was bringing out shippers with real fat on them was a nester, Bob Rasson. Everyone else was trying to graze his surplus on somebody else's land which was already overgrazed.

Carday shook his head. A range war could develop out of the way things were. Before cows had been brought in, fifteen-hundred-pound buffaloes with eighteen-inch wool had waxed fat here on four acres. Now it took twenty-five acres to grow a six-hundred-pound beef, and then, like as not, it was a four-hundred-and-fifty-pound runt. If it hadn't been that the banks had been getting Eastern money only Bob Rasson could keep on running cows. Overgrazing and ten per cent money was killing off the ranchers. . . .

The trail herds going through Plenty Wood Court outskirts were the most scandalous cows yet. Sheriff Carday rode out to see the stuff the ranchers were calling "shippers." Just one good bunch—it was hardly a herd—came by. Skim Rasson was running it, with two hired riders helping him.

Half a dozen buyers looked the Rasson animals over, and paid cash money, giving Skim a better price by half than anybody else got. The buyers explained they needed those good-looking beefs to tune up the looks of the other cows they bought through Plenty Wood country.

"And if that ain't a cursed insult I don't know what is!" Kipp Logan declared angrily. "It's gettin' so the packers is ruinin' the ranchers!"

Skim Rasson deposited the forty-five hundred dollars in the bank, and paid off his trail herd helpers. His mother had driven their wagon to town, and Skim loaded six months' supplies into it, among them twelve dozen No. 2 double spring traps. While the ranchers were working their heads off all winter, feeding their cows, young Rasson would be trapping!

The nester's cows would be protected from blizzards in small bunches up the draws and down by the creeks, eating wild hay—and Rasson never shot the deer, elk and mountain sheep that ate hay with the domestic stock.

However, it did not ease the tension when word got around that the hated nester had made four thousand dollars cash profit, and that no other cowman in the county had made expenses. The hate for the nester family grew.

Happily it was an open winter, right up toward Christmas. The water-holes were open, and coyotes, wolves and cougars came down off the mountains and sneaked in off the Bad Lands. It was sure a scandal, the ranchers complained, the amount of money the taxpayers were paying that nester boy, Skim Rasson, on bounties. He was making a man's wages from bounties, and nobody knew how much fur he was selling. One of those tight-tongued, sneaking, independent youngsters, they said.

Finally word came right from the bank that Skim's check for his London Fur Sales shipment amounted to a good thousand dollars. It was a good thing cowboys didn't have traps and gumption enough to turn trappers, or there wouldn't be a cowhand on a spread.

THEN one day Skim Rasson rode into town, grim-faced, and huddled in his calf-skin jacket and home-made chaps. He went to the office of Sheriff Carday. Five or six men were there enjoying the heat of lignite coal, for it was a fresh day, the northwest wind raw and threatening.

"I'd like to talk to yuh, Sher'f!" Skim said.

Carday squinted, then took the young fellow around to the prosecuting attorney's office, which was warm and empty. Prosecutor Haimes was out at the railroad.

"Well, Skim—what's the word?"

"I promised if I did come in with bad news, Sheriff, I'd tell the truth," Skim answered. "I didn't promise for shore to come in, but the way yuh talked about having trouble over with—legal—I come in, anyhow."

"Serious trouble, son?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, suh." Skim wiped sweat from his brow, tears blinking in his eyes. "Terrible serious. A killin'."

"Stop right there, Skim," the sheriff ordered. "Not another word. The United States Constitution says yuh don't have to testify against yoreself. Where had I better go, to look things over?"

"Back up the beaver marsh corner—this side of our place."

"The Rasson-Logan corner, up against the Government township corners?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, suh. The Johnny Marker is up from the marsh on Government corner monument." Skim was trembling, choking a little. "I stuck—there's a red neckerchief flyin' there on a pole. There's a trap in the water—an otter's in it. Over on the slope's some cedar trees—buffalo brush. In there—"

"That's enough, son." Sheriff Carday shook his head. "Thanks for helpin' the Law!"

Skim Rasson turned away, rested his elbow on the back of an armed chair and sobbed, unashamed. The sheriff looked at him. It had taken all the youngster's nerve, all his honesty, to tell what he had.

The sheriff told him to stay in town, to go to the hotel, and not talk. Then, though it was late in the day, Sheriff Carday headed away in the bitter winter day toward the remote Bad Land fastnesses. Ahead of him he drove a pack-horse with a light load—canvas, blankets, supplies for three or four days. He cut around the ranch outfits, keeping out of sight away from the trails.

No need to tell Sheriff Carday that this was serious business. That young nester had been terror-stricken, breaking under the strain. Carday could only wonder just what had taken place away out there in the Bad Lands.

He was in the Corner country when he stopped to make breakfast. He was weary, needed the fire, the coffee, the quickly and expertly prepared breakfast grub of flapjacks, broiled beefsteak, and plenty of the black coffee.

After eating he climbed a butte and searched for that Government monument Marker Johnny. There it was, east of him about a mile, silhouetted against the horizon sky.

Down from the square column of stones, in plain sight, was the Government Survey corner pyramid, on a small creek flat. Down the creek within quarter of a mile a pole stuck up with a red flag fluttering on it. Reaching it, Sheriff Carday looked down on an otter, floating back up where a spring poured out from under a low ledge of sandstone.

Tracks were in the thin, dust-covered snow—Skim Rasson's footprints coming down the slope out of the cedar thicket straight from a clump of buffalo brush. Carday circled clear, careful not to step into those tracks. Behind the buffalo brush he saw two figures, men lying frozen in death.

One was Kipp Logan, the Circle Triangle rancher. Gripped in his right hand was the breech of a big rifle—a .45-90. The other man was a cowboy, one of Logan's hands, known as "Lippy." Carday never had been able to learn much about him.

Coming down the slope were the tracks of Skim Rasson. He hadn't come within ten feet of the two bodies, but he had sat on one heel where he had stopped, losing his balance and putting out first one hand, then the other to steady himself.

The .45-90 had a shell just beginning to tip up out of the ejector. The reloading lever was pretty well down. The rancher's big hand had worked that lever. Lippy had had a .38-55, same model. The

sheriff shook his head.

"It could be a hangin' crime!" Carday reflected. "But these fellows were dead when Skim come down to look at his trap. They got here before the snow sifted down—it covered their tracks. They came to this brush from down there at the trap. Get the light right, and I can see their horse tracks, where they rode up the creek bank."

Sheriff Carday stood a long time looking up the tracks left by Skim Rasson when he had come down the slope. It was a good seventy yards to where the tracks came over the brow of that slope. Tracks from the otter trap led in the light snow out around and back to where Skim had ground-tied his horse and come on foot nearly half a mile, ducking and dodging from cedar to cedar, from clump of willows to patch of buffalo brush.

HE HAD stopped, on his hands and knees, looking down the slope to where the two men had been sitting on flat chunks of stone behind their ambush brush. Following Skim's horse tracks, backward, Carday moved more than a mile away to where Skim had left the creek, circling back on the ridges. He had left the creek where the rancher and his rider had crossed the water, and had started up the bank.

"He didn't ride into that ambush, the way his dad did!" Sheriff Carday sighed. "He circled around and come in behind the men who was waitin' to bushwhack him. It was two to one. I wouldn't blame him if he'd just pumped lead into their backs . . . Um-m—I better find out about that—where the bullets went in! Let's see—Skim's rifle is a forty-sixty Ballard, if I remember right!"

Sheriff Lon Carday thought of something. He followed the snow-filled hoofprints of the horses of Lippy and Logan. They led up the creek into the cedars nearly two hundred yards away. There in the thicket were two saddles, with blankets, ropes, slickers where they had been dropped on the ground. The bridle reins were tied to trees. Carday read sign.

"Dog-gone! That boy wouldn't leave them hosses tied there to starve, so he turned 'em loose. He could have taken his traps away from here and in the spring them two men might have been found tore up by coyotes. Instead, he stood around, figgering. He could have run out. The only question is—did he shoot them unbeknownst to 'em or did he come down on 'em, one to two, givin' 'em fair warning?"

Sheriff Carday spent hours studying the lie of the land. He was careful, making sure. He searched to find out where Skim had been, fighting that battle. Once young Rasson had stopped back of the ambushers, a twitch of his right foot showed his hesitation. But the shells he had pumped from his repeater had fallen to the ground less than twenty yards from the two men. There they were, showing through the sifted snow and dust. The brass caught the cold glint of winter sunshine. Brushing the snow away uncovered three empty shells.

"He got close, so's he wouldn't miss 'em!" The sheriff nodded. "I reckon I got it now," he reflected. "That coat-back was poked out—both places. Logan was hit in the front. Lippy . . . That hole in his cheek's where the bullet went in kind of catty-cornerin'. Um-m. Looks like it was Skim's second shot. He got Logan first. Logan was a tough old nut. He got in a shot . . . Why, he got *two* shots!"

Sheriff Carday stood lost in contemplation of the scene. If he knew sign, Logan had shot first but, surprised and a coward, he had missed. Skim could have shot in self-defense after hailing those two men. They had a right to sit in a wind-break, didn't they?

"I'll see what Skim has to say," Sheriff Carday decided, and headed for home.

Night was at hand, though, and Carday knew where Logan had built a line shack down the creek and over in a spring hollow. The lawman had been awake more than thirty-six hours, he was tired, chilled, and besides he had never got used to cold-bloodedly reading sign where men had fought and died, had frozen to death, or had just died naturally.

He built a fire in the line-rider's shack and ate his second meal for the day. He wondered if the riders in Logan's outfit had started out to look for him yet. Probably not. They would enjoy the joke if Logan got lost in the Bad Lands!

In the morning, rested, well-fed, Sheriff Carday headed back to Plenty Wood

Court. When he arrived, he found that the prosecutor had returned, and that Skim Rasson had recovered his nerve. When Skim stood before him he was grim and prepared for anything.

"How do yuh feel, son?" Carday asked him.

"What's legal—I'm satisfied," Skim answered.

"How about yore folks?" Carday asked. "They'll worry?"

"No, suh, they won't expect me till tomorrow." Skim shook his head. "I come here the short way."

"Had supper yet?"

"No, suh."

"Let's go eat."

The three went to the restaurant and ate heartily. Then they returned to the county attorney's office, where they sat down.

"Of course, Skim, yuh don't have to talk," Sheriff Carday said. "But yuh killed two men, and that can be proved. It'd be a big help, though, if yuh'd just tell us exactly what happened. First and middle and last."

"I found where two riders come up the Monument Valley creek," Skim said, as he studied his hands, thought carefully. "I come to where they crossed the creek from over where the Circle Triangle has a line rider's camp. They stopped their hosses at three places where I'd put down traps—wolf water set, a mink slide, and an otter feed-bench. One of 'em rode up the valley side around behind a ground cedar. I left their tracks, there and circled back over the ridge. Opposite where I had an otter set I tied my hoss. I come through the cedars and buffalo brush, around the mushroom rocks and down to where I could see into the cedars down the slope."

SKIM stopped, breathing hard, fighting for self-control. The two listeners watched him, waiting patiently.

"It was like where somebody bushwhacked my father, Sheriff!" Skim said grimly. "I'd found the tracks of a hoss I knew—the one my father's bushwhacker rode. Then I saw two men behind the buffalo bush where they'd piled up some flat rocks. Restin' on the rocks was two rifles, pointin' down to where I had my otter set. On'y I wasn't comin' along the creek bottom—I was on the slope behind them.

"That was our leased land, Sheriff, but we never begrudged men huntin', riding, stoppin' by! One feller was Mr. Logan, and the other was one of his cowboys, a feller named Lippy. They never heard me. I reckon I was mebbe twenty yards from 'em when Mr. Logan saw my shadow, and give a jump.

"I was ready, but he was terrible fast. He jerked his rifle round and shot. But he shot too quick and the bullet tore by me. I got evens up with him then. I hit him just as he shot . . . Lawse! That gun shore roared! But I hit him. Lippy leveled up but he kind of slipped. It spoiled his aim, and I got him."

Prosecutor Haimes looked at Sheriff Carday. The sheriff was not quite through. "Then what, Skim?"

"I was pretty sick—sweatin' cold." Skim looked away. "Prob'ly yuh'll laugh, but I—I worried about the fellers' hosses. They was tied out somewheres near, course. I hated to think of 'em standin' there—starvin'! I found 'em—prob'ly yuh'll think I'm lyin'—but I slipped off their saddles and bridles and turned 'em loose."

"Reckon yuh took the otter?" Carday said.

"I took nothin'!" Skim Rasson shook his head. "I thought I'd light out. Nobody would believe I'd faced two men in a fair fight, that both of 'em shot first, but missed. Then I thought I'd come and tell you, Sheriff, that I shot in self-defense. So I did, and left everything just the way it was."

"Do you expect us to believe what you've told, Skim?" the prosecutor asked.

Skim's face, already pale, whitened more. He sat staring at the floor. A shudder ran through him.

"I don't know what yuh can believe," he said at last. "I told the best I could remember. I promised Sheriff Carday if I ever came in I'd tell him the truth. I keep my promises, suh!"

"Soon as you found their tracks, you knew you'd have a fight—that it was their lives or yours?" Haimes pressed.

"Why, no, suh!" Skim shook his head wearily, hopelessly. "All there was to it, I was bein' careful. My father'd been bushwhacked, and the hoss that killer

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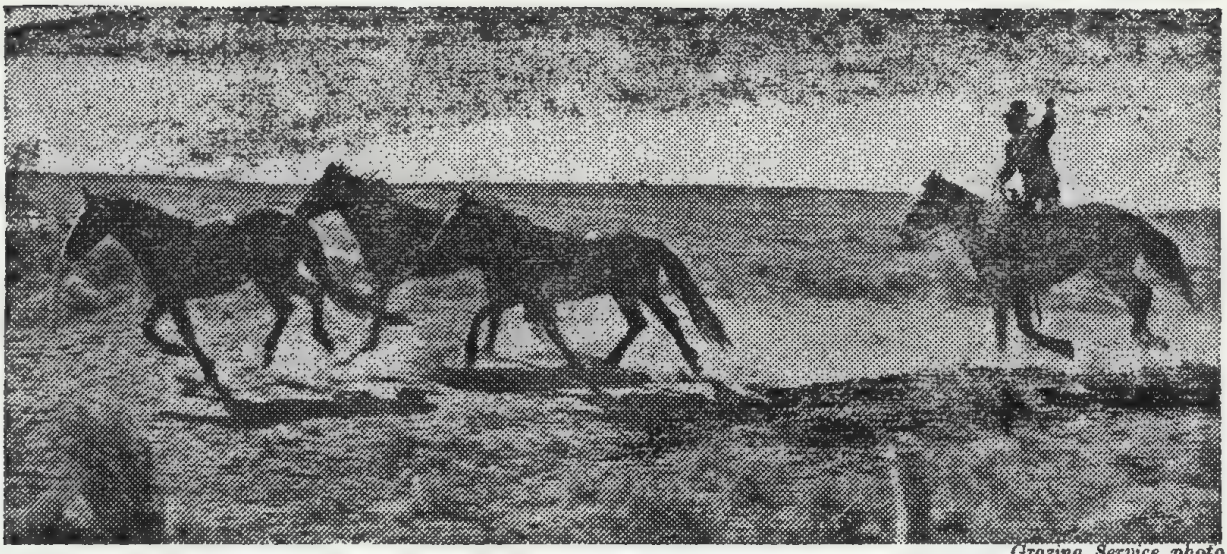

Grazing Service photo

A rider rounding up wild horses

Last Roundup for

THE WILD HORSES

By JACKSON COLE

Once free and untrammeled, these stalwart animals are now facing the danger of complete extinction by man!

WITHIN three years, the famous and picturesque wild horse bands of the West will be gone —completely wiped out—unless the public, and that's you and me, rise up and do something about it.

The powers that be say the wild horses are a pest. They are eating scarce feed needed for cattle. And they are no longer needed for work animals so there are no longer any wild horse trappers to catch and break them for sale to ranches. They are being caught now for a very different reason; to be put up in cans for dog and cat food, or shipped to Europe where people are hungry enough to eat dog and cat food.

A Stalwart Memory

The question is this: are purely cold economic reasons the only factor in making our decisions?

Because a few thousand head of horses eat a few acres of grass which cows might have, is this reason enough for wiping out one of the last stalwart memories of the great wild days of free range?

It seems man's fate to despoil the things he loves. Our ancestors came to this country seeking the freedom and richness of a

virgin country. So they slaughtered the forests and ruined the soil and polluted the rivers and spread the desecration until only a few green oases are left—and these still greedily eyed by the profit hungry.

Our last frontier goes down under the assault of barbed wire and "improvements." This is no argument to turn back the clock. The West that was can never be again and it would be wrong and foolish to try and stem the changes that must come. But the west, no more than the east or south, need not be turned into barren desert.

Man, who is ingenious enough to create machines that can alter the face of the land, must be ingenious enough to preserve the beauty of his heritage, lest he lose even the knowledge that he is man and not a disease which blights the earth wherever it touches.

The Western Fairyland

The West has always been a wonderful fairyland in peoples' minds—even those who have never been there. It has been a land of vast distances and blazing colors, or beauty in sky and plain and mountain that bring awe to the soul.

The Indian knew it well; he was reverent, he destroyed no life needlessly. When he killed it was for food only, and he made his peace with his gods and craved the forgiveness of the thing he killed. But the white man, who considers himself so much better educated than the Indian, has not often been his equal in the little matter of nobility of soul.

In Los Angeles County alone, according to Alexander Tilley, of the S.P.C.A., wild horses are being slaughtered at the rate of 6000 a month. At an annual rate of 72,000 animals killed, the wild herds will be gone in three years, Mr. Tilley estimates. The meat is put up in cans and about 60% of it used domestically to feed dogs and cats, the remainder sent to Europe where the dogs and cats would have to fight the humans for it.

Not all these animals come from California—they are shipped there for processing from ranges all over the west, including Montana, Idaho, Utah, Oregon, Colorado, New Mexico and Texas.

Many Complaints

Complaints have already poured in to the office of Los Angeles County Supervisor Leonard J. Roach. In an interview for the Los Angeles *Times,* Mr. Roach said he was considering some sort of quota to preserve the herds from total extinction, while yet reducing their numbers.

Dr. A. G. Feers, county livestock inspector made the point that since the wild horses were no longer being caught and broken for work, they were increasing unchecked. "In some parts of the West," he said, "the wild horse problem is an economic headache, in view of the high feed prices now in effect.

"From that point of view the slaughter is justified. It certainly is where the meat is sent abroad for human consumption."

Control Needed

There can be no argument about that. Where human life is at stake, food must be provided—of any sort. But some control seems indicated here, some check to the kind of thinking which has all but destroyed America's greatest natural resources, her forests, grass and game, and which is still destroying them at a rate many times greater than they are being replaced.

Any motorist who has ever driven through the West and seen a wild stallion limned against the skyline with his mane blowing in the wind, and with his brood scattered watchfully behind him, knows he has seen one of the great sights of the West which he would not care to let die.

We have yet in this wasteful, profligate country, to learn the lesson of conservation. We must save the things that are America's own. Let's not wait until it's too late, until we find that we have squandered beyond recall the priceless gifts that made our land so rich and fair!

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Coming Next Issue

BLACK DEVIL, an Exciting Story by BURL TUTTLE

Shoo-fly yanked on Red Mike's whiskers and swung the bottle

DEPUTIES THREE

By L. P. HOLMES

Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly take over the law in Settlement, and a couple of tough hombres sure don't like it one bit!

HAD ANYBODY ever told me and "Puggy" Jimpson and "Shoo-fly" Davis that there would come a time when we would sorrow over the misfortune befallin' "Bosco" Bates, we'd have brayed mean and raucous laughter right in their faces. For Bosco Bates is the big rough-and-tough sheriff of Cactus County. And in times past he's been in my and in Puggy's and in Shoo-fly's hair a big plenty.

He once throwed us in his starvation jail house. He's even made us work when we was plumb bogged down with this here fatigue disease. He's often kept us from nuzzlin' a jug of good, honest corn likker when we was so dry we couldn't spit. He's made us pay our bills.

He's run us around worse than Jake Pickle is run by Mrs. Jake, and Jake Pickle is the marriedest man you ever saw. Plenty is the time me and Puggy and Shoo-fly has wished Bosco Bates was in perdition with his back broke. But now—well, here's how it is:

"Skeet" Mustang finds Bosco layin' out along Stony Crick with a drygulcher's bullet plumb through him. Bosco ain't dead, but neither is he more'n a skip and a holler from spittin' in the devil's eye. Skeet high-tails over to Tepee Ranch headquarters, spreads the news, and gits a spring wagon. Him and Buck Kyle and Lee Hanford go fetch Bosco into town.

Right now Bosco is stretched out in Doc Lippy's office, where Doc is tryin' to plug up them holes before all of Bosco's life leaks out of him.

The news spreads fast all over Cactus City. Me an' Puggy are hunkered down in the shade of Willie Weehaw's store, tryin' to get used to the shock, when Shoo-fly Davis comes lopin' in from that little goat ranch he's got over in Yucca Basin. How Shoo-fly has heard the news, I dunno, but he has. He looks at us plumb sober and asks if it is true.

"Yup," says Puggy. "It's true."

"He ain't dead?" asks Shoo-fly.

"Not yet. But by the look of him, when they packed him into Doc Lippy's office, ol' Bosco is shore ridin' on a thin whisker."

"He's tough, Bosco is," I puts in comforting-like. "Tougher than a sheep-fed grizzly."

"While there's life, there's hope," says Puggy, as wise and important as though he'd been the first ever to think up them sage words.

SHOO-FLY hunkers down beside us. He's a little fellar, Shoo-fly is, not much bigger and jest as scrawny as one of them goats he raises. He ain't had a shave or a haircut since they scooped Moses out of the crick weeds. Now, peerin' out through all that excess wool, he's got the look of a sad and homeless poodle dawg.

"Times in the past," says Shoo-fly, slow-like, "I've felt like tearin' off one of Bosco's legs an' beatin' him to death with the stump of it. But right now, if I could get my hands on the stink-ant who shot him, I'd stage me a great big bloody massacree that they'd date time from."

"You wouldn't be takin' on that chore singlehanded," I growls. "Me and Puggy would shore be in there clawin'. Ain't nobody can drygulch Bosco Bates and get away with it, far as I'm concerned. If anybody has got a right to chaw their initials in Bosco's hide, it's us three. We've had more cause than anybody else. Bosco's our special preserve. When anybody else starts ridin' a trail across it, then I get my neck bowed. This is Ike Ferris that you hear talking, men."

Most generally when me and Puggy and Shoo-fly gets together, we begins thinking of a jug of likker to sort of meller our long friendship. But right now there ain't ary word mentioned about a jug. We jest stay put, waitin' and hopin' and swappin' a plug of eating-tobacco back and forth.

By and by, Buck Kyle and Lee Hanford come out of Doc Lippy's place, and we brace 'em pronto. They're both plenty grave-looking.

"Doc says it's a fifty-fifty chance, with jest a shade on Bosco's side," Buck says. "Even so, it'll be six weeks or two months before Bosco will be ready for a saddle again."

Buck and Lee git in the Tepee spring wagon and head for home. Shoo-fly scratches his head thoughtful-like.

"That leaves it up to us, I reckon," he says.

"Leaves what up to us?" asks Puggy.

"Takin' care of Bosco's law chore for him. There's ol' Bosco spread out in bed for weeks an' weeks. Now, if somebody don't put a shoulder under this here majesty of the law while Bosco is laid up, the law will fall plumb apart at the hinges. Yes, sir, it's up to us to handle Bosco's job for him until he's able to take over the reins again hisself."

"Can't hold up no law unless you have got a badge," says Puggy. "And we ain't."

"I'll git 'em," chirrups Shoo-fly. "I know where they are. You June bugs stay right here."

Bosco's office ain't never locked up, so now Shoo-fly ambles over there. Right away he's back, handin' me an' Puggy a couple of deputy stars, and keepin' one for himself.

"Saw 'em in a drawer in Bosco's desk last time he had me in there when he was

rawhidin' me over somethin' or other," says Shoo-fly. "Pin 'em on."

"Mebbe we ought to git Bosco's permission first," I says cautious-like.

Shoo-fly snorts. "How'n Tophet we gonna do that, what with ol' Bosco spread out an' leakin' misery through a bullet hole? Here's our chance to show we're public-spirited citizens, glad and willin' to stand behind our sheriff an' to look after the best interests of this here county. An' by gunnies, we're gonna do it. Pin 'em on."

Which we does. About that time, fat Willie Weehaw comes out of his store and sees us doin' it. His eyes sorta bug out a little.

"What are you three lazy, loafin', likker-lappin' jiggers up to? Gonna put on a little game of cops an' robbers?"

Shoo-fly bristles, stickin' out that twenty-six-inch chest of his, with a deputy star loomin' up right in the middle of it like a headlight on a freight engine.

"From now on," snaps Shoo-fly, "until Bosco is up an' around again, me and Ike and Puggy are the law in these here parts. And don't you fergit that for one second, you over-growed, penny-pinchin' tub of lard. You git set to sass us, an' we'll lug you to the jail house an' throw the key away."

Like I said, Shoo-fly ain't much bigger than a short drink of likker. But doggone if right now he doesn't seem to grow twice over. Mebbe it's that star he's packin' that does it. That's how it seemed to me. Willie Weehaw must have got the same impression, for he shuts up and pops back into his store, jest like a fat ol' groundhawg divin' for its burrow.

Shoo-fly swings around, high-chinned and tough.

"We'll drop in at the Oasis Bar and let some other smart jiggers know what's what," he says sternlike.

Me and Puggy trail along, kinda uncertain. That star I got pinned on seems all of a sudden to weigh half a ton. I'm beginnin' to have serious doubts about bein' strong enough to hold it up.

I can see that Puggy is feelin' the same way.

But not Shoo-fly. No, sir. That little hooty-corn steps along like he's leadin' a parade of generals or admirals or some such. There's a layer of law a mile wide and ten feet thick aridin' on Shoo-fly's shoulders, and he's packin' it like it was a feather.

JEST before we get to the Oasis, a couple of riders come dustin' into town, spankin' right up to the saloon, swingin' down, an' swaggerin' in like they owned a choice slice of all creation. Shoo-fly stops dead, then waits for me and Puggy.

"You see them two galoots?" he asks, bristlin' like a cactus plant.

"We see 'em," I gulps. "That was 'Red Mike' Purdy and 'Bo' Shileen. While them two tough jiggers are in town, I'm packin' this star in my hip pocket."

"You are not!" snaps Shoo-fly. "You're packin' it right out in the open, proud and purposeful."

"Purposeful of what?" chatters Puggy, nervous-like.

"Upholdin' the law, of course. Wasn't us three right there in the Oasis about six months back when Bosco Bates gives Red Mike Purdy an' Bo Shileen their walkin' papers? Wasn't we? We was. We hear Bosco give them two junipers a permanent floater. Bosco told 'em to git out of Cactus City and to never come back. Now ol' Bosco is laid out right next to death's door, so Purdy and Shileen come bargin' back in through the pasture gate as big as life. Well, what was good enough for ol' Bosco is good enough for me. Come on."

I knows jest how that there famous condemned man felt while climbin' the thirteen steps. So does Puggy. If we'd had the sense of the dumbest sheep that ever blatted, we'd have skun outa there. But there was somethin' about Shoo-fly that wouldn't let us. That little wart musta had us mesmerized. Anyhow, we fumble along behind him into the Oasis.

Red Mike Purdy and Bo Shileen are bellied up to the bar, where "Tug" Stevens is jest settin' out bottle and glasses.

This Red Mike is as tall as a door and jest as wide. He's got red hair and a red beard and red wool on his wrists and a chest thicker than a baboon. Bo Shileen is tall and skinny, with a face like a trapped wolf. Both of 'em pack two guns, tied down.

Puggy mumbles kinda quavering-like, "*Adios,* Ike. It's been good knowin' you. Oh Lord! have pity on a pore sinner about

to come creakin' through them pearly gates."

I can't answer. I jest ain't got no talk left in me, an' that's whatever.

But Shoo-fly! Why that danged little wart braces right up to them two woolly wolves.

"You jiggers ain't drinkin' here," he snaps. "Bosco Bates give you a floater, a permanent one, and it still stands. So tie a knot in yore tails an' light a shuck outa here. Git goin' *now!*"

Red Mike looks at Shoo-fly like he can't believe his eyes or his ears. Like a bear would look at a chipmunk aimin' to run him out of a hollow log. Then Red Mike begins to laugh an' laugh. It sounds like a bull bellerin' in a deep gulch. Red Mike laughs till he durn near cries.

He whoops, he hollers, he bawls. He beats his fists on the bar. He whams Bo Shileen on the back. He chokes an' snorts. He doubles up an' staggers. It's plain to gather that Red Mike figgers this is the funniest thing he ever bumps into in all his misspent life. He's jest plumb amused.

He sets Bo Shileen to laughin'. Even Tug Stevens, who is the biggest sourpuss I ever run across, has to smile. Yes, sir, it seems to be plumb amusin'. But me and Puggy ain't laughin'. We're watchin' Shoo-fly, knowin' the signs and how to read 'em.

Shoo-fly is a little, dried-up squirt. But when he gets his roach up, there ain't nothin' he's afraid of this side of purgatory. Yes, sir, get Shoo-fly Davis in the right frame of mind and he's plumb wicked. Me and Puggy can see he's that way now.

All of a sudden it happens. Red Mike, he's doubled-up, huggin' hisself with glee. Then Shoo-fly takes off with a run and a jump. He lands plumb straddle of Red Mike's back. Shoo-fly winds his skinny laigs around Mike's middle and sets his spurs. He reaches over Mike's shoulder and gets a double handful of Mike's red beard. Then he goes to work like ten thousand agitated bobcats.

He yanks on them red whiskers until he's got Red Mike's head pulled plumb around like that of a bulldogged steer, until Mike's bugged-out eyes is durn near lookin' plumb behind his own shoulder blades. Whilst this is goin' on, Shoo-fly never leaves off rakin' his spurs up and down Red Mike's flanks.

You should have heard Red Mike. He ain't laughin' now. Not one little bitty laugh. He's hollerin' and how! With his head twisted durn near off his shoulders, Mike can't see where he's going. He's jest heavin' an' bullin' around plumb blind. He barges into the bar. He upsets a couple of poker tables. He staggers an' lurches an' spins.

All the time, he's yellin' bloody murder, reachin' back an' tryin' to git a hold on that imp clamped between his shoulders. He ain't havin' a bit of luck, for Shoo-fly is hangin' on like a wood tick dug in for two days. And all the time he never leaves off murderin' Red Mike with them spurs.

I AM so wrapped up watchin' Shoo-fly have his fun, I forget all about Bo Shileen. But all of a sudden I wake up, and there's Bo with a drawn gun, slippin' around to where he can get a good lick at Shoo-fly. Now there is one thing that no self-respectin' gent could ever stand for, and that's allowin' a friend to be gun-whipped from behind.

So, almost without thinkin', I grab me up one of Tug Stevens' chairs and plumb ruin it on Bo Shileen's head. Yes, sir, I really lean into that swipe I take at Bo. The chair comes apart like a handful of matches. Bo just grunts and piles up in a heap.

Right about then, Red Mike pulls another of his wild, blind sashays, and it brings him slamming into the bar again. Quick as a wink, Shoo-fly lets go one hand outa Mike's whiskers, reaches over, and grabs up a quart bottle of Old Hellfire whisky that Tug Stevens had set out for Mike and Bo. Shoo-fly lets out a war-whoop and starts tampin' Red Mike into the floor with that full quart of snake juice.

It takes four good belts to quiet Mike. The first three get him part way down, and then Shoo-fly clamps his spurs a little deeper and gets both hands on that bottle. Whamo! That does it.

The bottle comes apart, splashin' broken glass and Old Hellfire all over the place. Red Mike loosens up and quits, out of his misery for a while.

Shoo-fly untangles hisself and gits Red Mike's guns. I do likewise with Bo Shi-

leen's six-guns. Shoo-fly turns to Tug Stevens, who's hangin' onto the bar, bug-eyed and a little pale.

"We'll have one," said Shoo-fly, stern-like. "On the house."

So help me, Tug never said a word. He just pours them drinks, and we down 'em. Puggy bein' all unnerved—as who wouldn't have been after that ruckus—reaches for the bottle to pour another, but Shoo-fly speaks up sharplike.

"One drink is the limit of any star-packing law gent, Puggy."

Puggy don't argue, either. He just looks kinda mournful and dazed, and he lets it go at that.

Pretty soon Red Mike Purdy and Bo Shileen begin to stir and grunt. With Red Mike's guns in either fist, Shoo-fly helps 'em back into action with a couple of kicks.

"Git up, git out, an' don't come back," he orders.

You never see two milder gents. Red Mike and Bo wobble out and crawl into their saddles. Red Mike makes three passes at his stirrup before he finds it. They head out of town, lookin' like they're still tryin' to figger out whether it was earthquake, fire, or flood they'd been through.

Shoo-fly stands there, watchin' them go. He's got his arms folded and one foot stuck out a little ahead of the other. He looks kinda like a picture I see one time of a gent named Napoleon.

Kinda dreamy-like, Shoo-fly murmurs, "The majesty of the law. We sure upheld her."

Things run along quiet for a couple of days after that. Me and Puggy and Shoo-fly move into Bosco Bates' office, and there ain't nobody to chuck us out. We git word from Doc Lippy that ol' Bosco is going to make the grade, though he's a plenty sick man.

The news got around about what happened to Red Mike Purdy and Bo Shileen. Different citizens started droppin' in at the office to say howdy and such. And durn me if they don't look at me and Puggy and Shoo-fly plumb different than they ever did before. Kinda respectful-like, for a change.

This is meat and drink to Shoo-fly, who's become the most swelled-up, important little toad you ever saw. But me and Puggy, we ain't so shore we care for this deputy business. For one thing, all Shoo-fly will allow us is one drink a day. And I ask you, what is one measly drink every twenty-four long hours?

That's what Puggy grumbles to me when Shoo-fly ain't listenin'.

"No percentage in dyin' of thirst jest to uphold that consarned majesty of the law that Shoo-fly is always bleatin' about," complains Puggy. "Me, I'm plumb ready to swap this durned, star-shaped, nickel-plated chunk of authority that I got pinned to my manly busom, for a full jug of corn likker and the shady side of a buildin' any old time you say, Ike."

NOW Puggy is shootin' almost dead center on my own sentiments. I was jest goin' to agree when Buck Kyle came ridin' up to the office door. Buck owns the big Tepee outfit, and he cuts a lot of ice in Cactus County. When Buck speaks, wise men jump.

Buck now speaks. "You three jiggers did yoreselves a fair chore of work on Red Mike Purdy and Bo Shileen. But that don't mean you can rest on yore laurels forevermore. Not if you're goin' to keep on packin' them stars. You done any thinkin' on who dry-gulched Bosco Bates and why?"

"As I see it," says Puggy, tryin' to look important, "somebody who didn't like Bosco up and took a plug at him."

"Amazing!" says Buck, plenty sarcastic. "How'd you figger that out?"

Puggy subsides, plumb crestfallen.

Shoo-fly stirs around and says, "Funny as it may sound, Buck, yuh got to admit that Puggy's got one possible answer. Mebbe somebody did cut down on Bosco jest because they had it in for him. Soon as they dropped him, they skun out for parts unknown. Then again, Bosco bein' the law, somebody could have wanted to get him outa the way so that they could pull some kind of a flindy, like rustlin' a jag of cows or some such. She's six one way and half a dozen the other."

"Uh-huh," grunts Buck. "That's right. But polishin' the seat of yore levis around this office all the time ain't goin' to supply no answer. You won't find no sign hidin' under this doorstep. You'd ought to be out where Bosco was shot, and do some

ridin' and lookin' for real sign. When you find it, you ought to foller it and see where it leads. Maybe you'll find an answer that makes sense. Now I'll ride out with you jiggers and show you where Skeet Mustang found Bosco. You can take over from there."

Well, that's what happens. Buck Kyle is one of them kind of gents you don't argue with. Not if you got good sense. So me and Puggy and Shoo-fly, we ride out with Buck to Stony Crick, where Buck reins up in a little clearin' in the willow thickets.

"Right there, Bosco was layin'," says Buck, pointing. "Skeet never would have found him except that he run across Bosco's horse and back-tracked."

There's a smear on the grass, and there's green flies still buzzin' around the spot. Ol' Bosco had shed himself some tar right at that spot.

"Now I've put yuh on the trail," says Buck, "get busy and do somethin'."

With that, he up and rides off home.

Shoo-fly puts his horse right over to that sign and starts lookin' around.

"Only two places that dry-gulcher could have been holed up to draw a bead on Bosco," he says. "Either somewhere close around in these willow thickets or up behind that point of rock yonder on the bluff across the crick. We'll comb the willows first."

It's hot ploughin' around in them cussed willows. They give off a pollen that burns a man's eyes and throat.

"Durn bunch of foolishness, bullin' around in here," I hears Puggy mumble. "Can't see nothin' and can't find nothin'. If I had me a jug, I'd find a cool place by the crick and forget this whole cussed parade."

Puggy's got something there, for a fact, only we ain't got no jug and Shoo-fly is all business. We finish the willows without pickin' up a smidgin of sign. Shoo-fly herds us off to the point of rocks on top the bluff yonder. And so help me if we don't find color right away.

A man had been squattin' behind them rocks. You could see plain where his heels had gouged into the ground. He'd been hid there quite a time. Scattered around were half a dozen cigarette butts. But them smokes hadn't been rolled with regular brown papers. They'd been rolled with white.

We back-track from there, and pretty quick we finds where a bronc had been tied, and right beside this sign is a empty rifle shell. Shoo-fly pounces on it quick as a cat, but after a look, he shrugs his shoulders.

"Just another thirty-thirty," he says. "Which don't tell a thing, what with just about everybody and his cousin in these parts ownin' a rifle like that. Only thing we can do now is see if we can foller sign good enough to find where this bronc went."

It ain't so hard, once we get started. Even Puggy has perked up some, now that we got somethin' real to look for. Shoo-fly is as eager as a hound dawg on a lion track. That sign leads us plenty far. It skirts Tin Can Roughs, goes plumb across the Chicadee Hills, down to the edge of Wickiup Desert, and straight to Peach Blossom Station.

The last place some galoot sure used plenty of imagination in namin', for there wasn't a peach blossom within a thousand miles. And for a station, there were jest two or three sun-blasted shanties, the biggest one passin' for a sort of store and a refreshment parlor.

WHILST we are still a good quarter of a mile from this Peach Blossom Station, Shoo-fly gets a rush of sense to the head. "For a little while we'll pack these stars in our pockets instead of on our shirts," he says. "No sense advertisin' jest now that we're ossifers of the law. We'll have a better chance of doin' some snoopin' if our badges ain't too open to the public eye."

"Yeah," grunts Puggy, gettin' his badge outa sight quick. "An' a lot better chance of not bein' potted at long range by some suspicious gent behind a Sharps buffalo gun. I've been told that some purty tough gents hang out at this Peach Blossom Station."

We find jest one hombre in the store. He's fat and rat-eyed and sulky-lookin'.

"Any drinkin' likker on the premises?" chirps Shoo-fly.

"Beer," says Rat-eye.

The only thing you could say for that beer was that it was reasonable wet. Outside of that, it was warm an' tasted like stale rainwater mixed with quinine. But

we laps up a couple, and then Shoo-fly asks for a couple of sacks of smokin' and a book of papers.

"No, not brown papers but white ones," he says.

"That's a break for me," says Rat-eye. "Mebbe I'll get rid of these danged white papers if enough gents like you drift in. Only one in these parts who smokes 'em is Bo Shileen. I got enough on hand to keep him goin' for a hundred years."

Shoo-fly never bats an eye. "Then this here Bo Shileen gent is a right intelligent hombre," he says. "White papers never hurt any man, but too much of the brown ones give yuh asifedity throat."

Rat-eye blinks a couple and looks a little more stupid than before. "I never noticed," he mumbles.

We don't waste no more time headin' out of Peach Blossom Station. We ain't hardly stirrin' up dust again when Shoo-fly is pinnin' his star back on what passes for a shirt with him. He hists his chest a little higher.

"Ain't nothin' so tough about this sheriffin' job that I can see," he says. "All yuh gotta do is foller yore nose an' spend a dime or two. So Bo Shileen is the only one in these parts who rolls his smokes with white papers, eh? Well, now we know who plugged Bosco Bates. Mr. Bo Shileen did."

"Yeah," grunts Puggy. "And what good is findin' that out gonna do us? After that curryin' you and Ike give him and Red Mike Purdy, neither of them two sidewinders is gonna quit travelin' this side of South Americy. We ain't never gonna get the chance to slap an arrest on Bo Shileen."

"Betcha a gallon jug of corn on that," says Shoo-fly, confident-like. "Them two June bugs ain't never gonna rest until they have a try at gettin' even for that curryin'. They'll be back. All we gotta do is sit tight an' wait for 'em to come sneakin' through the clover."

"I can stand the waitin'," growled Puggy. "But it's the meantime thirst that's boggin' me down."

It is plumb late when me and Puggy and Shoo-fly get back to Cactus City. Speakin' personal, I'm tired and hungry an' saddle-galled from that long ride. And thirsty! So I declares myself.

"When I agreed to wear this cussed star, Shoo-fly," I says, "I didn't sign up to imitate no durned camel. Majesty of the law or no majesty of the law, tonight I have me a couple of real snorts of red-eye."

Puggy is on my side instanter. "I'm ridin' the same bronc with Ike," he declares. "I ain't no camel, either."

Shoo-fly gives in, and not too reluctant. "We'll put up the broncs, have supper, and then I'll bring a quart over to the office."

"Only a quart!" squawks Puggy. "Bring a jug."

Shoo-fly begins to bristle. "A quart or none at all. Mebbe you jiggers is all ready to forget yore public duty, but I ain't. So it'll be jest a quart."

Me and Puggy don't argue no more. After all, while a quart of corn likker ain't as much as a jugful, it's still a lot more than no likker at all. An' we realize that Shoo-fly can be a contrary little wart when he's a mind to be.

That quart ain't so bad. By the time that the bottle guggles empty, I'm feelin' purty danged good, which is kinda smooth and relaxed and contented. Puggy, he's durn near his old self again.

"Sheriffin' ain't such a bad chore after all, all things concerned," he says. "Sorta gives a man standin' in his own community. Only one thing gripes me. There's only two bunks in this durned office, an' tonight is my night to sleep on the floor. Which I'm gonna do right now, me bein' plumb fagged out."

After that, he slides down in a corner and begins to snore. I locate me one of the bunks and follers suit.

KER-BLAM! The whole world blows up. It blows me plumb outa bed. From the cussin' an' scramblin' around, I know it's done the same to Shoo-fly. Puggy comes up whooping.

"Lemme out!" he shouts. "Lemme out! It's Judgment Day an' I'm a sinner. Lemme out!"

Me and Puggy and Shoo-fly hit for the door, and we hit her plumb together. She's a tight squeeze, with every man clawin' for himself, but we manage to bust through without bulgin' the walls.

Outside, she's dead dark. The whole town seems to be sorta crouched down an' shakin' in its boots. Then doors an'

winders begin to slam, and voices begin to yell, everybody wantin' to know what in Tophet has took place.

Above everybody else, you can hear Mrs. Jake Pickle callin' on the angels to protect a poor lone woman. That in one breath and with the next givin' pore old Jake hades 'cause he ain't handy to ketch her if she faints.

About then, Shoo-fly gets an idea. "The bank!" he yelps. "Mebbe somebody has blowed the bank. That means the law is needed. Come spurrin', you two."

Shoo-fly lights out like a scalded cat, and me and Puggy start after him. I hear somethin' comin' up behind us, snortin' an' puffin' like a wind-broke hippypotamus. Me and Puggy turn jest as this thing hits us.

It's fat and it's white and it's goin' only who knows where. It knocks me and Puggy flat, runs right over us, and keeps on goin' without missin' a stride.

"What was it, Ike?" whimpers Puggy. "What was it? Was it the ol' devil hisself clawin' at us? Was it, Ike?"

"Naw," says I, gettin' to my feet an' finally understandin'. "That wasn't the devil. That was Willie Weehaw in his night shirt. Git a wiggle on. Shoo-fly figgers somebody blowed the bank. If so, he'll be needin' us two deppities."

So I lights out again, hopin' to gosh I don't run foul of no more fat storekeepers in their night shirts and plumb stampeded and headed for the tall sage. Bein' run over by one in a night is a plumb plenty for Ike Ferris.

Sure enough, Shoo-fly has figgered the answer. There ain't no front to the bank at all. There's jest flinders everywhere, an' dust an' the smell of giant powder.

Off to one side, I hear somebody grunting and groaning. I dodges over there and steps on this somebody, who rolls out from under me and gives me a cuss and a kick at the same time. That ain't no way to treat a gent who is aimin' to do a good deed of rescue. So I dives back in on this unthankful jigger to teach him manners.

A gun goes off right in my face. I feel the slug part my hair. Then I got holt on him, or rather holt on part of him. I got holt of a bushy beard. Right then I have a hunch about who I'm tangled with. Red Mike Purdy!

Now Ike Ferris never was one to overestimate himself. I ain't fool enough to figger I can handle a big lug like Red Mike all by my lonesome. So I sets up a holler for Puggy.

Flounderin' along, Puggy falls right on top of me and Red Mike. Between grunts I informs Puggy plenty vociferous what we're tangling with, so then both me and Puggy get to work in earnest. Gentlemen, that shook down into one first class roundelay.

She's a plenty wild fracas, there in the dark and in the flinders and in the powder smoke and the dust. I hits Mike, and Puggy hits Mike. Mike, he hits both of us. Then Puggy hits me, and I hits Puggy. After which me and Puggy get back on the main target again.

Through it all, I hear Shoo-fly givin' tongue and settin' up his favorite warcry. In between, there's various citizens of Cactus City gallopin' in every which direction. First thing you know, there's a dozen fights goin' on everywhere, over nobody knows what or who with.

It can't last, of course, no more than thunder in the high peaks. It has to end sometime. Which it does, with me and Puggy finally gettin' Red Mike stretched and quiet. Leavin' Puggy to guard our man, I go lookin' for Shoo-fly. I finds him wavin' a length of two-by-four scantlin' over somethin' long and skinny in the dust.

"Me and Puggy draws Red Mike," I pants. "Who'd you git, Shoo-fly?"

"Bo Shileen, by gummies! He was one tough tarantula until I petted him with this chunk of two-by-four. Now I'm proddin' him down to the jail house. You and Puggy do the same with Red Mike. This pair of sidewinders will finally get it through their thick skulls that it don't do to play fast and loose with the majesty of the law in these parts. Not while us three deppities are runnin' things."

We figger it all out later in the Oasis Bar. Tug Stevens opens up again for the night, and business is plenty rushing. Even Jake Pickle is there, snifflin' one now and then, all eyes an' ears whilst he listens to the story.

"She's an open trail now," crows Shoo-fly, takin' on that Napoleon pose again. "Red Mike Purdy an' Bo Shileen was aimin' to rob our bank. But first they

wanted to make sure Bosco Bates wouldn't be around to gum up the works. So Shileen hides out along Stony Crick an' drygulches ol' Bosco. With Bosco down an' out, Bo Shileen and Red Mike ride into town to look the ground over. Me and Ike and Puggy run 'em out again. But tonight they comes back.

"They figger to blow open the bank-vault door and skedaddle with all our hard-earned cash money. But they don't know so much about giant powder. They use too much for the job. They blow up the whole she-bang. They blow themselves plumb out into the street. Before they can git their ropes straightened out, Ike and me and Puggy got 'em hawg-tied. Now they're in the jail house, and there they stay until Bosco Bates is back on his feet to give 'em the rest of the branding. Gentlemen, the law is safe in Cactus City."

I'll tell a man that Shoo-fly puts on a real speech. It sets the crowd to cheerin'. Tug Stevens liked to surprise everybody to death by pourin' one on the house.

While the crowd is recoverin' from the shock of this amazing thing, I see Puggy sidlin' for the door. He's got a jug hid behind him. He'd mooched it when Tug wasn't looking.

I sneak out after Puggy, and we lines it for the office.

"Here," says Puggy, "is where I ketch up with one great big accumulated thirst. If you're askin' in, Ike, take a slug. A real one."

Which I does, plumb enthusiastic, because me and Puggy don't feel a bit bad over havin' mooched the jug of corn. We figger we earned it.

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 9)

Springs and Abilene, Kansas, and other markets. The drives to the North proved fairly successful, though the drivers experienced many hardships and dangers going through an uncivilized and partly unexplored country.

The Chisholm Trail

This first trail north was called the Northern Trail, and it was a few years later after Dodge City had opened up as a cattle market that the famous old Chisholm Trail came into being or was known as such.

From the best records we can obtain, the old Chisholm Trail started at San Antonio, Texas, ran through New Braunfels, crossed the San Marcos river, thence ran to Austin, crossing the Colorado River three miles below Austin. Leaving Austin, the trail wound its way to the right of Round Rock, the town where the famous outlaw Sam Bass was killed. Thence on to Georgetown, and to the right of Belton, to old Fort Graham, crossing the Brazos River to the left of Cleburne. Then on to Fort Worth, crossing the Trinity River just before reaching the then little town.

From then on through St. Joe on to the Red River. After crossing the Red River the trail wound on up through what was the Indian Territory and has since been a part of the present state of Oklahoma and on up through Caldwell to the Kansas line.

It was in passing through the Indian country that the trail drivers usually had to be most careful. That section of the country was wild and rough, only a little more wild perhaps than many parts of Texas, but there were more Indians and they could be treacherous anytime or anywhere.

On the Lookout For Beef

Usually the Indians were on the lookout for beef, and if given a steer or two with which to supply their immediate needs they would be friendly and allow the trail drivers to go on with their cattle unmolested. But if they were refused beef and the trail herd was not well protected by an adequate supply of well-armed men, than the Indians might attack, or attempt to stampede the herd, and get away with quite a number of the herd.

Horses were more valuable than cattle and each trail driven herd's trail boss and men had to look well to their horses. Horse thieves would sometimes come in to the camp of trail drivers and visit with them. Visitors of course were always welcome and it was very impolite to ask a fellow too many questions about himself or his business.

Often these horse thieves would bring news of what was going on in other parts of the country and as very little news got around to the trail herdsmen it was always welcome. They would usually claim to be going back south from a trail drive completed. Naturally such men would be asked to stay overnight. There was no fixing the spare bedroom as there is today when visitors stay overnight, as each traveling horseman usually carried his own bedroll, or at least a blanket tied behind his saddle, and used his saddle for a pillow.

Sometimes the trail drivers would awaken in the morning to find their visitors had departed during the night and had taken with them several choice horses, and while this did not cause the same trail drivers to refuse to feed or to give an overnight invitation to other men who came along, it served to make them more careful and more wary of visitors whom they did not know.

The Danger of Stampedes

Stampedes were a thing that were guarded against as much as possible, but a herd of cattle may stampede for the slightest cause. Little things that many times would go unnoticed by cattle, at other times would throw them into a wild stampede.

It is perhaps true that cowboys or trail drivers hated a stampede more than anything else. This can easily be accounted for, as the stampedes were mostly at night, and when a fellow has been in the saddle all day from daylight to dusk, he is tired and when he gets to sleep, he hates to be awakened and called out for a wild ride in a cattle stampede.

While there is considerable danger in riding in a stampede and trying to turn or handle a bunch of fright-crazed cattle, it was possibly the loss of sleep, the rude awakening that the cowboys hated. Chances are that they never took the time to think of the danger.

There was one instance where a herd of two thousand cattle stampeded one night seemingly without any cause. For four hours the men rode like mad after the herd and when they had finally stopped the stampede and daylight came, they could easily see that they were short several hundred cattle. They found the cattle some six miles from where the stampede started, and when they investigated the cause of the stampede they found that they had bedded the cattle down the night before in an area where there were a number of gopher holes. It is supposed that one little gopher probably came up for air right under some wild steer and that caused a stampede of two thousand cattle.

Often the scampering of a rabbit or any small animal might throw an entire herd into a stampede, for if one animal raised from the bedding ground with fright, then that same fright was communicated to the entire herd, and in less time than it takes to tell it, the entire herd would be in a frenzied wild dash to where they or no one else knew.

The Hardship of Thirst

Thirst, or lack of water, was another hardship upon the part of trail drivers. There was one instance when a trail boss had hired a guide to pilot his trail herd and then when the trail forked and the scout told him that he should take the left hand trail as the signs showed that it had been used that year while the other had not, the trail boss took the right hand trail anyway, saying that the other did not lead in the right direction.

The herd was for almost a week without water, and finally had to be driven back to the fork of the trail and the left hand trail taken at last. There was plenty of water on the left hand trail, but in the meantime many cattle had died of thirst and the trail drivers, after using up their meagre supply, were almost famished for want of water before they came upon it.

On a trip with a trail herd through the Indian Territory, George Saunders was appointed spokesman for three herds which had combined along the trail. Chief Bacon Rind, with about two hundred braves and squaws, came out and demanded beef and supplies. Saunders, trying his best to get along, had quite a bit of provisions such as sugar, bacon, flour, prunes, beans and some canned goods unloaded from the wagons and placed in one pile. This he offered to give them in addition to some beef on the hoof and all seemed satisfied except one half breed Mexican and Indian who demanded more and in his talk of course got all the Indians on his side.

Saunders finally lost his patience and ordered the goods restored to the wagons and told the Indians they would get nothing and the men who had gathered around all started on their way, but the agitator with a dozen braves rushed Saunders and grabbed him. He had drawn his gun but was unable to use it.

Here was a ticklish situation. Saunder's men had drawn their guns, but he knew if there was a shot fired that he would be the first to go, for there were no less than a dozen guns trained upon him.

However, true to the type of the pioneer and the trail-driver, he did not become panic stricken, but told the Indians that his men were ready and if they did anything to harm him his men would kill those nearest him first. It was a case of iron nerve and it won. Finally the Indians moved away, and after they had let go of him he did not offer to give them any of the provisions he had first offered.

A Great Pioneer

It was but fitting that George W. Saunders was the first vice-president of the Old Trail Drivers. Long after those exciting trail drives were over I knew him personally at Fort Worth, Texas, and like all others who knew him was proud to call him my friend.

The account of the death of this great trail driver and pioneer of the Texas cattle industry appeared in the San Antonio, Texas, News, on July 3rd, 1933, and in part is as follows:

"Pioneer cattleman loses gallant battle against long illness. Romantic and adventurous career comes to end for man who donned cowboy's chaps and sombrero at age of 5; prominent in live stock industry, George W. Saunders, aged pioneer cattleman of Texas, who has virtually lived the last ten months because of an iron will, died this morning at his home at 514 West Elsmere place. He was 79 years old."

This great pioneer cattleman also served as a lawman. He was a deputy sheriff at Goliad, Texas, and while holding that office apprehended some notorious lawbreakers and had some narrow escapes from death. He was handy with a six-gun, but loathe to take a human life. That he had a nerve of steel even his enemies, and they were few, never denied.

Through Saunders the Witte Memorial Museum came into possession of an unsurpassed collection of old cattle-brands. For years he was president of the Old Trail Drivers, and there has not been a meeting of those grand old fellows since 1933 but that they have spoken softly of the great deeds of the man who caused their organization to be formed, their buddy of the old trail-driving days who had gone on that last long trail drive and who had left a thousand fine memories as a real man, a real trail driver, an honor to the state of Texas and the cattle industry. *Adios.*

—FOGHORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

RUTHLESS gunmen and stalking Indians marshal their forces in TOMAHAWK TRAIL RACE, the action-packed Wayne Morgan novel by Walker A. Tompkins in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN.

From the moment that Wayne Morgan rides out of the Pinecone foothills and finds the smouldering ruins of a nester's cabin he knows that here marauding Sioux have been at work, have escaped with their scalps and their plunder.

Two hours later, when Morgan reaches the town of Pitchfork, he finds a posse gathering in front of the ugly square courthouse. Heavily-armed riders are converging there, grim-jawed and slit-eyed. As Morgan rides up to the outskirts of the crowd, he sees that the men are listening to a lean young waddy mounted on a steeldust gelding which bears a Circle M Brand.

"I tell yuh, it's our chance to capture Chief Crazy Eagle!" the waddy shouts. "He's camped over in Foxtail Canyon, alone. I seen him through my glasses from the rimrock, not three hours ago."

Morgan is startled. Foxtail Canyon is where he had left his Yaqui companion, Blue Hawk. Was it possible that Blue Hawk had chosen a hideout which concealed the notorious Sioux chieftain, Crazy Eagle?

When the posse heads for the canyon Wayne Morgan rides with them. It is Duncan McLane who leads the men, for it is the young Circle M rancher who claims to have spotted Crazy Eagle.

At a point a mile below Foxtail Canyon, McLane splits the posse into two groups, sending one wide to the left to circle around behind the canyon. This group is headed by Kurt Barboo of the big Oxbow spread.

Morgan keeps with McLane's group, which will strike from the lower reaches of the Canyon.

An hour elapses before a gunshot reaches their ears, a signal that Kurt Barboo's riders are ready to begin the attack from the upper end of the canyon. Before the echoes of the shot dies out, McLane leads his riders out

of the pines and heads into the narrow mouth of the Foxtail.

A clamor of yells sounds up ahead. McLean's riders redouble their speed, sure that Barboo and his posse have closed with their redskin prey. Yet no shots ring out—

A moment later McLane and Morgan break out into a clearing in time to see a lone Indian backed against the base of a cliff, his arms uplifted before the ring of guns which Barboo's riders level at him as they close in.

"It's Crazy Eagle!" comes Barboo's strident voice. "And we've corralled him all by his lonesome, just like Dunc said. There ain't a sign of another redskin further up the canyon!"

Wayne Morgan groans as he recognizes the Indian. This is not Crazy Eagle, the renegade Sioux. Morgan's worst fears are confirmed. For Barboo's riders have captured the Masked Rider's loyal Yaqui partner, Blue Hawk!

When the angry men are about to hang Blue Hawk, Morgan stops them.

"Wait, men!" Morgan yells, the urgency of his voice bringing a momentary hush. "This isn't Crazy Eagle. He's not even a Sioux. And I can prove it!"

Morgan turns to meet the deadly glare of Kurt Barboo. The wealthiest rancher in Arrowhead Basin, owner of the vast Oxbow spread, Barboo is not used to having his word questioned, and he has said he is dead certain the Indian captive is Crazy Eagle.

"I never seen you around Pitchfork before!" snarls Kurt Barboo. "What business yuh got tellin' us this ain't Crazy Eagle? I'm in favor of stringin' this redskin up here and now!"

Morgan reaches out to loosen the noose on Blue Hawks neck before the Yaqui chokes.

"I can speak the Sioux jargon," Morgan says grimly. "Give me a chance to question this Indian."

He speaks swiftly to Blue Hawk, his words unintelligible to the panting ranchers about him. Blue Hawk merely shakes his head. Morgan speaks again, in another tongue, and another. For a fourth time Morgan changes dialects, and Blue Halk grunts a gutteral reply, his dusky face lighting with comprehension.

"What's this?" demands Duncan McLane, scowling puzzledly. "What does he say?"

Morgan turns to face the circle of angry cattlemen.

"I tried the Ogallala tongue," he said. "No dice. Then I tried Blackfoot, Nez Perce and Yaqui. This Indian claims to be a Yaqui hunter. No Sioux who lived could speak Yaqui. That tribe comes from down Arizona way."

Kurt Barboo grunts contemptuously.

"Are we goin' to let this stranger buffalo us, men?" demands the Oxbow boss sarcastically. "I say this is Crazy Eagle. The quicker we string him up the better—"

But even as Barboo is speaking Wayne Morgan sees the temper of the posse begin to change. More than one man in the grim crowd have reason to hate Barboo. Small ranchers, they have felt the pressure of Barboo's Oxbow combine, seeking to squeeze them out of Arrowhead Basin.

Morgan convinces them that to hang the Indian would be plain murder and the ranchers finally agree—much to the disgust of Barboo.

Blue Hawk is taken to the jail at Pitchfork. That night Wayne Morgan finds a way to rescue the Indian from jail, and Blue Hawk escapes. No one knows it is the Masked Rider who has freed the Yaqui.

When Colonel Buck Thornton, the Indian agent, arrives to identify the prisoner that some men still claim is Crazy Eagle, he learns that the captive has escaped.

While the hunt for Crazy Eagle goes on, Thornton puts up a notice announcing that the Tomahawk Indian Reservation is in the market for a thousand head of prime beef. Top prices will be paid to the rancher who delivers the cattle to the agency on or before the first of August.

"I reckon you know what that means, don't you?" inquires a bald-headed oldster whom Morgan recognizes as the owner of the Drover's Hotel. "It's an invitation to a trail race over to the Tomahawk Agency. The first cattleman who hazes a thousand head of beef over to Thornton's corrals gets the prize."

Action steadily mounts in this engrossing novel as the trail herd race finally starts between the Oxbow outfit and Duncan McLane's Circle M crew. How the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk take a hand in the contest and battle sinister Indians and ruthless gunmen makes TOMAHAWK TRAIL RACE a yarn that is packed with thrills from start to finish!

Also in the next issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN is SALT OF THE EARTH, a

dramatic novelet by Allan K. Echols.

At Dobson's Trading Post near the Red River there was tension in the air. Men's laughter was uneasy, their voices forced as they made pleasantries.

Two of the men did not join the conversation at all, but washed the trail dust out of their throats with coffee at the far end of the bar. They were Bruce Carter and Stub Logsdon, who had just ridden in from Texas a few moments before. They sat and listened, feeling the tension in the air, wondering how long it would last.

It could go on just so long without cracking—and crack it did. It started with an argument between old Jasper Waite and a big man named Marlin. Waite claimed it was a mighty strange that a bull could get out of his corral and into Marlin's when the gates of the corrals had not been open.

"Call me a thief to my face, will you?" Marlin roared. "Waite, I'm gonna kill you for that. Go for yore gun."

"Well, Marlin, maybe there's been some mistake." Waite gained control of himself.

"I said go for yore gun, Waite. No man is gonna call me a thief in front of my friends!" [*Turn page*]

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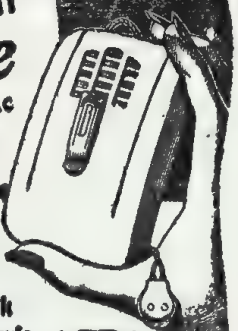

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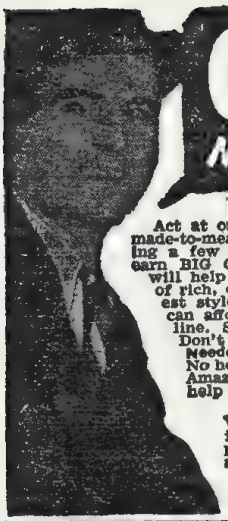

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There was a swagger in the pace of Marlin as he threw his heavy bulk away from the bar. There was a kind of droop of hopelessness in the carriage of Jasper Waite as he slid off his stool, as though he knew he were going up against a professional gunman and did not have a chance.

A hush fell over the room, broken only by the clatter of the knives and forks which the two young strangers dropped into their plates as they slid off their stools.

It happened with surprising suddenness. The big man named Marlin did not give Waite a chance to get set. Waite was still on the move, getting clear of the other customers, when Marlin jerked his gun with amazing speed for such a big man.

His weapon roared just as Waite saw his intentions and reached for his own. Waite did not have a chance to get his gun up. Marlin's bullet caught him before his whole body was clear of the man next to him at the bar. The bullet hit him in the shoulder and knocked him back against the wall,

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where he balanced a moment, then slid to the floor.

Somebody at the bar swore, and two men siding Marlin leapt backward and pulled at their weapons to cover the crowd, in case there should be any objections to the unfair trick.

But those two men were not fast enough to draw their Colts before a new voice came into the play.

"Better drop 'em, gents," it said sternly.

Bruce Carter was the speaker. He stood now with his back to the wall, his gun in his hand. A tall young Texan with broad shoulders bulging out of his shirt sleeves, narrow hips, and eyes like gray granite.

Siding him was his partner, Stub Logsdon, short and on the heavy side, fair haired, and with a chubby face and turned-up nose that gave him a perpetual grin.

The two Marlin men looked at the pair of strangers, and must have seen bullets with their names on them in the gun muzzles, for their guns slid out of their hands and the weapons clattered to the floor.

That was the way that Carter and Logsdon took a hand in the trouble at the Trading Post—but that's just the start of the action in this exciting novelet. You will enjoy every moment of SALT OF THE EARTH.

BLACK DEVIL, by Burl Tuttle, the story of a battle of wills between a man and a wild horse, also appears in the next issue, and there will be other carefully selected yarns

[*Turn page*]

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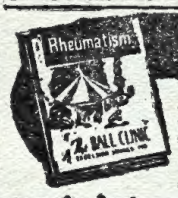

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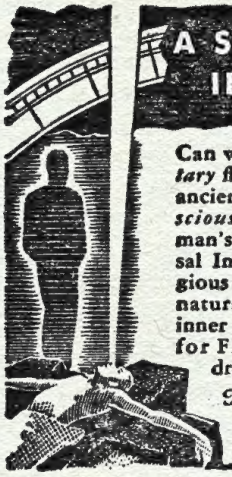

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OUR LETTER BOX

WHICH stories did you like best in this and other issues of MASKED RIDER WESTERN? Write and tell us, for we value your opinions. By knowing your likes and dislikes we are able to plan future issues for the greatest enjoyment of all our readers. Thanks to all of you who have written us recently. And now we'll let some of your letters speak for themselves:

I have just finished reading the April issue of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I liked THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH the best. Blue Hawk does not show himself enough.—*Philip Elton Chapman, Newcastle Creek, N. B.*

I am writing to tell you how much I enjoy reading Western magazines, but I enjoy MASKED RIDER WESTERN the best. In the April issue the best story was THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH.—*Loretta Erdman, Souris, North Dakota.*

We sure enjoy reading MASKED RIDER WESTERN. The stories we liked best were as follows: THE HAUNTED HOLSTER, FANGS OF EMPIRE, THE BATTLE OF MILE HIGH also SNAKE EYES. Blue Hawk stays too much in the background, we would

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like to have him come out more in the open. We'd like to have a longer story of Puggy Jimpson and his two partners, also a little more of Shoo-fly Davis' snake juice, as he called it in his story before SNAKE EYES. Yes, we sure think the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk are swell. Also Ike Ferris, Puggy Jimson, and Shoo-Fly Davis.—*Mr. and Mrs. Art Bercier, Rolla, North Dakota.*

I read MASKED RIDER WESTERN every issue. I enjoy all the stories except those about Ike, Puggy and Shoo-fly.—*Bill Woodward, Fredonia, N. Y.*

I am a reader of MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I have just finished THE HAUNTED HOLSTER and enjoyed it very much.—*Rodney F. Rice, Manila, Ky.*

Being a reader of nearly all your publications, and the MASKED RIDER WESTERN. I would like to say all the magazines are okay. MASKED RIDER WESTERN is good, only you forget to put in stories now and then that ought to be in. Maybe not all the readers like it, but I and quite a few others like to read about honest gamblers such as Watches John Vidlak. Let's have some more about him.—*Joe Korb, Cleveland, Ohio.*

That's all the letters we'll quote from this time, but there will be more excerpts from your letters next issue—and let's hear from more of you. Please address all your letters and postcards to The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. See you all next issue. Thanks—and so long!

—THE EDITOR.

SKIM FACES THE MUSIC

(Concluded from page 94)

rode had gone up the creek ahead of me. I couldn't prove anything."

"How about it, Sheriff?" Haimes asked.

"He's told it all—exactly the way it happened," the sheriff answered. "They shot at him first. There's the hole in his shirt where Logan's big bullet cut through."

"Why, I never noticed!" Skim Rasson cried.

"We'll fix the legalities," Sheriff Carday said. "We'll take the coroner and jurymen, with track-readers for witnesses."

"We'll get it all down on the records, too," Haimes said, and added, "You know, son, killings are terrible . . . What did you notice, Sheriff—the big thing he told?"

"What I read in the tracks, and what I liked best wasn't the self-defending. That was right and natural." The sheriff hesitated, because his voice was not quite under control. "What I liked best of all was . . . Well, yuh turned them hosses loose, Skim. It wasn't yoreself yuh thought of most—it was them hosses tied in the brush, sufferin'. I reckon yuh're just a nester and trapper outfit. But yuh're a shore enough rancher, too. Reckon yuh'll soon be raisin' hosses, too, as well as cows."

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